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A Critique
Edited by
Rajnath

Contributions by M. H. Abrams
Michael Vannoy Adams
Jonathan Culler
Howard Felperin
Rodolphe Gasché
Jean H. Hagstrum
Murray Krieger
Vincent B. Leitch
Christopher Norris
Leonard Orr
Rajeev Patke
Rajnath
Michael Ryan

DECONSTRUCTION: A CRITIQUE

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Edited by

RAJNATH

*Professor of English
University of Allahabad*

M
MACMILLAN

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Notes on the Contributors

M. H. Abrams, a critic of repute and a distinguished expert on English romanticism, is Professor of English at Cornell University. He is the author of *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*, both classics of modern criticism.

Michael Vannoy Adams teaches at the New School for Social Research, New York. He has contributed essays to various scholarly journals.

Jonathan Culler, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University, is a distinguished critic and a leading expert on contemporary criticism. His publications include *Structuralist Poetics*, *In Pursuit of Signs* and *On Deconstruction*.

Howard Felperin, Professor of English at Macquarie University, is the author of *Beyond Deconstruction*.

Rodolphe Gasché is Professor of Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo. One of the early experts on deconstruction, he published a long essay on 'Deconstruction as Criticism' in *Glyph*.

Jean H. Hagstrum, Emeritus Professor of English at North Western University, is the author of *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*.

Murray Krieger is Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine. A distinguished American critic, he has published extensively in the field of literary criticism. His major publications are *The New Apologists for Poetry*, *The Tragic Vision*, *Theory of Criticism* and *Poetic Presence and Illusion*.

Vincent B. Leitch, Professor of English at Mercer University, is the author of *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*.

Christopher Norris is Reader in English at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology. His publications include *William Empson, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, *The Deconstructive Turn* and *The Contest of Faculties*.

Leonard Orr teaches at Notre Dame University, Indiana. A former editor of *Critical Texts* he is the author of *Semiotic and Structuralist Analyses of Fiction*.

Rajeev Patke, Reader in English at the University of Poona, is the author of *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens*.

Rajnath is Professor of English at the University of Allahabad. His publications include *Twentieth-Century American Criticism* and *T. S. Eliot's Theory of Poetry*. He is the editor of the *Journal of Literary Criticism*.

Michael Ryan teaches at North Eastern University and is the author of *Marxism and Deconstruction*.

Introduction

RAJNATH

Deconstruction is of French origin but it has found most fertile soil in America. Derrida's philosophy has not been taken seriously by philosophers, but American literary critics have built on its basic assumptions the magnificent edifice of a new critical movement. Interestingly enough, Derrida himself emerges as a major literary critic, if judged by his own standards which do not distinguish between literature and philosophy.

The backdrop against which deconstruction emerged in France was essentially different from the background of deconstruction in America. In France deconstruction came into being in reaction against structuralism which, like phenomenology, touched the American critical scene only at a tangent. Deconstruction in America, like reader-responsism, emerged against the background of the New Criticism which had had long hegemony.

The literary criticism in America during the sixties was a confluence of several critical trends: some old, others just surfacing, but with none of them taking a predominant position. It is said that the New Criticism came to an end in 1957 with the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. However, the immediate reaction against the New Criticism came from the Chicago critics, whose manifesto came out in 1952 under the title *Critics and Criticism* edited by their leader R. S. Crane, which included Crane's essay on Cleanth Brooks and Elder Olson's on William Empson – two virulent attacks on the major practitioners of the New Criticism.

The Chicago critics continued to publish in the sixties. In 1962 came Wayne C. Booth's major critical work, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, written under the influence of the Chicagoans. Booth stressed the need for pluralism in fictional criticism as against the New Critics' monism. In 1967 R. S. Crane published in two volumes his *Idea of the Humanities*, where in the second volume the New Critics are again denounced for their monism.

But the real blow to the New Criticism came from reader response criticism and deconstruction. Both movements began in America in the late sixties and attained maturity in the seventies. Reader-response criticism came into existence with the publication of Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The 'Reader in Paradise Lost'* (1967) and Norman N. Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968). The first deconstructive essay in English translation was Derrida's own 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', published in 1970 in *The Structuralist Controversy*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. In 1971 Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* ushered in deconstruction as a critical movement in America.

At the very initial stages of reader-response criticism and deconstruction, Fish and de Man each published an essay demolishing the basic premises of the New Critics. Fish's essay 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', first published in *New Literary History* (1970) and later reprinted as an appendix in his *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972), counters the New Critical position of W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in 'The Affective Fallacy'. Wimsatt and Beardsley have argued that the critic going by the effect of the work on the reader is sure to go amiss. Fish gives a significant quotation from their essay where 'the affective fallacy' is defined as 'a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it does)',¹ and goes on to demonstrate the fallacy of the affective fallacy.

Fish argues that literature is made in the mind of the reader, not in 'the printed page or the space between the covers of the book'² and therefore the work's effect on the reader cannot be ignored. The New Critics' shibboleth that the poem is on the page has been found untenable and their belief in the objectivity of the text is reckoned no more than an illusion. Fish also calls in question the New Critics' idea of spatial structure which presumes that the critic responds to the total utterance which is the unified literary work. As against the New Critics, Fish maintains that the structure of a work of literature is generated by the temporal flow of the reading experience and 'the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance'.³ Fish also seeks to demolish the New Critics' binary distinction between ordinary and poetic language by tracing poetic qualities in what generally passes for ordinary, conversational language.

If Fish points out the fallacy of the New Critics' 'Affective

Fallacy', de Man in his 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism' finds fallacious their 'Intentional Fallacy'. In 'The Intentional Fallacy', written jointly by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, any consideration of the writer's intention is placed outside the frontiers of criticism. In their essay Wimsatt and Beardsley have maintained that 'the design or the intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art'.⁴

De Man argues that the New Critics' exclusion of intention is necessitated by their emphasis on organic unity. As the writer's intention flies in the face of the idea of organic unity, its consideration in literary criticism is considered fallacious. It is an artefact such as chair, not a natural object like plant, which is marked by intention.

Although the New Critics deny the writer's intention and postulate that the unity of a literary work is organic, their stress on irony and ambiguity in literature undermines organic unity. 'Instead of revealing a continuity,' writes de Man, 'affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity.'⁵ Irony and ambiguity can characterize only an intentional object and by emphasizing these qualities the New Critics accept intention by the back door.

De Man differs with the New Critics in his concept of intention. The New Critics believe in only one kind of intention, that which the writer has in mind at the time of composition, and which can be inferred only from biographical information. But this intention, de Man argues, is different from the intention which is realised in the structure of a work of literature. The structural intention directs and controls various components of a work and designs them into a whole. As against the New Critics, de Man maintains that a literary work is an intentional, not a natural, object.

I have intentionally referred to the above essays by Stanley Fish and Paul de Man, because they mark a watershed in American literary criticism. The New Criticism may have started weakening around 1957 but its final end came only around 1970 when Fish and de Man challenged some of its basic premises.

The essays in this volume have a dual purpose. They aim at giving a critical and comprehensive account of deconstruction, and at the same time they place deconstruction in multiple perspectives. Murray Krieger covers the entire gamut of contemporary criticism, whereas M. H. Abrams studies a particular segment of it.

But being traditionalists, both argue that the human concern is not completely absent from deconstruction. My own and Jean Hagstrum's essays are studies in comparison. Christopher Norris, Michael Ryan and Michael Vannoy Adams examine deconstruction in relation to other disciplines, while Rajeev Patke assesses its relevance to the study of poetry. Howard Felperin examines the dilemma in which deconstruction finds itself. The last four essays study the individual critics.

In his essay 'From Theory to Thematics: the Ideological Under-side of Recent Theory', Murray Krieger argues that moral and ideological meanings are ever present in literary theory. Even when the critic's focus is on the verbal structure, as in the New Criticism and deconstruction, his attitude to the structure itself brings out his moral concern. In his brief survey of Western critical theory, Krieger demonstrates how the explicitly stated morality gradually yields place to the morality suggested by the literary form. In the New Criticism the spatial form is not merely the juxtaposition of opposed meanings of verbal units resolving into a synthesis, but also a suggestion of the breakthrough of the time temporal by the eternal present which has obvious ontotheological implications. As against the New Criticism, deconstruction, with its dissociations of language from reality and the emphasis on pure temporality, expresses by implication faith in 'the disappearance of God'.

In 'Construing and Deconstructing' M. H. Abrams distinguishes between the two kinds of reading that the deconstructionists make, a conventional reading of construing and a critical reading of deconstruction. Abrams calls them reading₁ and reading₂. He traces this dual reading, like a couple of other ideas in Derrida, back to David Hume.

The standard procedure followed by the deconstructionists is to move from reading₁ to reading₂, subverting the former by the latter. Abrams takes up as an example Derrida's reading of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*. Derrida's first reading of the *Essay* has nothing unusual about it. He has as much faith in the determinate meaning as any other reader trained on conventional meaning which is presumably the outcome of the conventional view of language. It is in the second reading that he finds the contradiction between what Rousseau wants to say and what actually gets said, giving rising to deconstruction.

Abrams seeks to correct the distorted image of Derrida that

emerges from most commentaries on him. Derrida, according to him, does not believe in 'anything goes in interpretation', as the determinate meaning first discovered will constrain the 'freeplay' of language in the deconstructive reading. Abrams finds the procedure he discovers in Derrida in J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading of Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal'. Like Derrida, Miller makes a dual reading, one conventional and the other deconstructive. Abrams shows his personal preference for conventional reading over deconstructive reading.

My own essay starts with a discussion of the parallels and differences between the New Critics and deconstructionists in their attitude to language. It points out how Richards anticipated Derrida in his concept of language and the way words function in sentences. Comparing the New Critics and deconstructionists, the epigones of Richards and Derrida respectively, I point out that they agree on the presence of the referential property of language and diametrical oppositions in poetry. Cleanth Brooks and J. C. Ransom, on the one hand, and de Man and Hillis Miller, on the other, are in agreement that the language of poetry conflates referentiality with rhetoric, denotation with connotation. Both Ransom and Brooks speak of the reconciliation of opposites. In deconstruction opposites do not reconcile but cancel each other out; nevertheless their presence is a precondition for deconstruction.

Where the New Critics and deconstructionists part company is the structure of poetry. The New Critics idealise the spatial structure with a centre, whereas the deconstructionists believe in the temporal structure and decentring.

In 'Samuel Johnson among the Deconstructionists' Jean H. Hagstrum argues that despite the gap of about two centuries between Samuel Johnson and the deconstructionists, one finds some interesting parallels between them. Johnson anticipated the deconstructive notion as expressed by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* that a later poet can be imitated by his ancestors.

Like the deconstructionists, Johnson also believes that a work of art cannot be reduced to determinate ideas, as its performances are inconstant and uncertain. Johnson also provides the apt vocabulary for describing the deconstructive style. He would have called it 'terrific', 'repulsive' or 'bugbear' style. Some of the adjectives that Johnson employs to castigate Shakespear can effectively sum up the style of the deconstructionists; 'fantastically perplexed', 'far-fetched and ineffective', 'forced and unnatural', for instance.

In 'Philosophy, Theory and the Contest of Faculties' Christopher Norris expresses the opinion that philosophy and criticism are best kept apart. He disapproves of the attempt on the part of pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard to convert philosophy into criticism by calling it the interpreting of texts. Deconstruction is not an offshoot of pragmatism, as Rorty makes it out to be. He counters Rorty's argument that in its willingness to give up most of the truth-claims, deconstruction becomes another version of pragmatism. De Man's assertion that the referential function of language is not completely denied in deconstruction is itself a rebuttal of Rorty's thesis.

In 'The Marxism Deconstruction Debate in Literary Theory' Michael Ryan takes issue with deconstructive theorists as well as Marxists who discern nothing but antithesis between deconstruction and Marxism. If Christopher Norris reduces deconstruction to formalism, Frederick Jameson and Terry Eagleton fail to historicise deconstruction.

Ryan discerns political leftism and cultural pluralism in Derrida. He argues that deconstruction points out the way representation and discourses construct social reality. The same social event can be construed very differently by different news media, ABC and CBS news, for example. Similarly Ryan shows how a subculture subverts the dominant culture, just as a subtext subverts the main text, which has obvious Marxist implications.

In 'Deconstructive Philosophy and Imaginal Psychology' Michael Vannoy Adams examines the parallelism between Derrida and James Hillman, the propounder of the imaginal psychology. Adams starts with an account of the oppositional logic of structuralism which not only arranges phenomena in binary opposition but also privileges one phenomenon over another. Derrida undoes the logic of opposition by bringing in his deconstruction and dissemination stemming from the freeplay of signifiers.

Like Derrida, Hillman also rejects 'oppositionalism' which he discerns in Freud as well as Jung, since it results in the reduction of image into concept. He sets off against 'oppositionalism' his de-structuralising or revisioning which, like Derrida's dissemination, postulates the freeplay of the image. Both Derrida and Hillman inveigh against interpretation which reduces a series of signs or images to some ultimate sense.

'Deconstruction and American Poetry: Williams and Stevens' by Rajeev Patke is an application of deconstruction to these two

American poets. Starting with the differing definitions of deconstruction by Jonathan Culler, Josue Harrari, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Derrida himself, Patke goes on to demonstrate how close Heidegger and Wallace Stevens come to Derrida.

Patke takes up poems by William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens for extended analysis, as they seem to anticipate in their poetries Derrida and his deconstruction. Williams's 'The Descent' and Stevens's 'It must be Abstract' and 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself' are given by their poets 'dual identities' which undercut each other. These poems undermine the Romantic idea of organic unity which is embedded in a single unified meaning. They are marked by self-deconstruction, as the 'dual identities' are intentionally and self-consciously generated by the poets for the purposes of deconstruction.

In 'The Anxiety of American Deconstruction' Howard Felperin avers that the American version of deconstruction has given cause for anxiety to both the Marxists and the humanists. Whereas the Marxists find deconstruction reactionary, the humanists consider it revolutionary. For the Marxist or leftward critics deconstruction is a form of aestheticism which in its excessive preoccupation with language returns criticism to the idealist metaphysics. For the humanist critics, on the other hand, deconstruction with its irrationalism challenges humanism which has had a long tradition in Western criticism. The most subtle form of anxiety of deconstruction one discerns in deconstruction itself. On the one hand, it is by its very nature inimical to institutionalisation and, on the other, it seeks to institutionalise itself. Deconstruction today finds itself in a situation where it has already been institutionalised with students trained on deconstruction having joined faculties. If deconstruction acquiesces in this routinisation, it ceases to be deconstruction; and if it continues to subvert it, it not only opposes itself but loses all hopes of institutionalisation. Either way there is reason for anxiety.

In 'The Post-Turn Turn: Derrida, Gadamer and the Remystification of Language', Leonard Orr, through a deconstructive reading of Gadamer and Derrida, arrives at the conclusion that in deconstruction language is remystified and speech reasserted, undercutting its apparent emphasis on demystification and writing.

Apropos of Derrida's *différance* and its double implication of deferral and difference, one temporal and the other spatial, Orr says that the differential spatiality suggests mystification of the present.

In his review article on Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* Rodolphe Gasché offers a critique of de Man's critical postulates. Starting with an exposition of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, on which de Man draws so heavily, Gasché goes on to attempt a deconstructive reading of *Allegories of Reading*. While demystifying and detotalising the text through the deconstructive denunciation of its unifying, unitary principle or meaning, de Man's deconstruction creates a new unifying principle. Totalisation detotalised in deconstructive reading results in retotalisation which needs to be deconstructed again.

Gasché also states that while denying that the text has cognitive strata, de Man's deconstruction admits cognition through the back door. Knowledge in deconstruction is a negative knowledge but it is knowledge all the same. It is a knowledge, for instance, of the fact that all totalisations and retotalisations of knowledge need to be debunked.

'The Lateral Dance: the Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller' by Vincent B. Leitch touches on the major concerns of Hillis Miller, such as transformation of metaphysics, rhetoric as magic, the lateral dance. Leitch argues that despite Miller's opinion that the tradition of presence and the tradition of difference have nothing in common, one comes across metaphysical presence in Miller as well as the other deconstructionists. Leitch gives several examples from Miller to the effect that in the text are present simultaneously traditional metaphysics and its subversion. He demonstrates how the deconstructive reading is a search for the literal base whose failure gives rise to another deconstructive reading.

Leitch finds present an element of conservatism in deconstruction, as its ultimate aim is to renew and preserve culture by salvaging suppressed materials. Moreover, the fact that the deconstructionists deal primarily with the texts of the great tradition and that their readings have so far failed to bring about any massive revisions in the tradition also reinforces their conservatism.

Jonathan Culler's 'Hartman and Derrida' is a review article on Geoffrey Hartman's *Saving the Text*, a book-length study of Derrida's *Glas*. Starting with general speculations on deconstruction, Culler points out its threefold implication for literary criticism. It disrupts the hierarchical relationships in binary oppositions such as philosophy and literature, the literal and the metaphorical, the intrinsic and the extrinsic; it identifies some fundamental questions

relating to general human concerns on which literary criticism can focus; and it offers a particular style of reading which disclaims any unity or predominant attitude that the text may possess.

Hartman's place in the movement of deconstruction is that of a maverick. Culler subscribes to this view. The very question posed in *Saving the Text*, how to save the text rather than subvert it, is anti-Derridean, as Derrida will not accept that there is something called a fixed determinate text.

Examining deconstruction from different angles, the essays collected here cover a wide range of topics relating to deconstruction such as tradition versus deconstruction, the nature of deconstruction, deconstruction and other disciplines, deconstruction of deconstruction, and the future of deconstruction. It is hoped that the book will provide the reader with a definitive account of deconstruction and set him thinking not only of the aspects of deconstruction but criticism in general.

Notes

1. W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (London, 1970) p. 21.
2. Stanley Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, Calif., 1974) p. 397.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 388.
4. Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 3.
5. Paul de Man, 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism', *Blindness and Insight* (New York, 1971) p. 28.

1

From Theory to Thematics: the Ideological Underside of Recent Theory*

MURRAY KRIEGER

I will be confining my observations to a number of critics on the American scene. My objective is not to conduct a survey but to examine – through a few examples – a persistent and unintended consequence of the recent antithematic direction in theory: thematising is to be avoided as theory is to search for a purity that would celebrate method while suppressing substance, and structural functions while suppressing ideology. Such an emphasis, with its fear of the ontological and its consequent suppression of the worldly references of words, has led to an imbalance and, in some quarters, a smugness that regards with disdain the critical concern with the moral and ideological consequences of literary works. My use of the term *ideology*, I hasten to add, covers a spectrum of commitments far broader than the political – indeed the entire range of moral–thematic belief systems – although in the end most of them may be seen as having political consequences.

It is difficult, if one reads and believes even a small part of much currently fashionable theory written in the United States, to continue to take seriously the question of literature's explicit moral and ideological meanings, however ideological the motives behind or under the writing may be. Having retreated from the notion that posited moral philosophies can be taken at face value, as if they meant what they claimed to mean, and having questioned the notion of literature itself as an exclusive selection of privileged

*This essay is a substantially revised version of my article 'In the Wake of Morality: the Thematic Underside of Recent Theory', *New Literary History* (issue on 'Literature and/as Moral Philosophy'), xv (1983) pp. 119–36. My focus here is more sharply upon ideology as the parent of moral concerns.

texts, one is more likely these days to turn on the question and spend one's efforts attacking its obsolescence. Perhaps I can suggest a sense of this attitude by recalling a moment of self-definition that was pressed upon me several years ago, while I was being introduced as a speaker before a major university audience. My introducer repeated the words spoken by another theorist, a well-known critic identified with the school of deconstruction, who had preceded me onto that podium some weeks earlier. Looking forward to my appearance, he was said to have reassured his audience that if its members felt unreceptive to his hard message, they could wait for the more agreeable pieties that would issue from me as a representative of 'the moral gang'. As I heard the phrase, I found it (and still find it) reminiscent of 'the gang of virtue' (those in the service of an unfeeling Western ideology) named – though by an unsympathetic character – in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; and it is similarly condescending, if not contemptuous.

I mean to spend some time here discovering the extent to which I deserve that attachment, but more important, discovering why the current critical fashion can see it as quaintly archaic, one which these days has presumably been interred for good by the scepticism of semiotic studies.

I suppose the moral gang of which I am supposed to be a member contains most of the major critics in the history of our dominant literary tradition in the West. It is hardly news to report that Plato – despite his fear of, and opposition to, the arts – set the terms of moral obligation which were to be taken up by critics to come, whether their discourse was intended to support or disagree with Plato's position and, consequently, to defend or undermine any or all of the arts. The critics' – and through them the arts' – responsibility to the moral realm was from that beginning unquestioned, whatever the questions that might be brought about the nature of that responsibility. Even Aristotle, whose *Poetics* (and, even more, whose *Rhetoric*) seeks at times to evade an immediate relationship to moral consequences, never – perhaps because he is working in the shadow of Plato's issues – lets loose of an at least tangential contact with the moral realm, so that we cannot assess his total impact as an aesthetician without invoking the *Nicomachean Ethics* and allowing that work and the *Poetics* to furnish mutual illuminations upon one another. And others of the ancient treatises on the arts, as we move into Latin works, treat moral concerns far more openly and directly.

But it is in the tradition of the Renaissance *Art of Poetry* and the Renaissance *Poetics* that, whether claiming allegiance to Horace or to Aristotle, treatises on literature seem to become unabashedly aware of criticism's moral obligations (as well as those of the art being criticised or theorised about) – probably as a result of the Neoplatonism that pervades these works and that moment in our intellectual history. In the work of a wonderfully talented and varied horde of sixteenth-century Italian critics and their brilliantly urbane heir, Sir Philip Sidney, the moral function of poetry – as an experiential extension (and thus a rhetorical demonstration) of philosophical principles – is an almost automatic assumption. Nor would it occur to them to consider making a distinction between what ought to be the moral objectives of poetry (whatever may be the shortcomings of individual poems) and the moral objectives of the critical discourse that is to instruct poems about their proper mission. It is a major advantage of Platonism, once Renaissance Neoplatonists turn it positive (that is, once they invert Plato) so that they may defend poetry rather than condemn it, that the oneness of moral attraction in universal goodness – as it gathers beauty and truth within itself – can allow all kinds of discourse to lose their distinctness as they reflect the single idea.

Though the metaphysic changes radically, Enlightenment and neo-classical poetics retains an inevitable moral flavour, with regard to both its own character and the character of the poems which are its objects. In a gigantic critic like Dr Johnson, we find some degree of struggle as he seeks to maintain the primacy of the moral,¹ but – despite some wavering here and there – he can hardly be said to maintain anything else as primary. His predecessors and contemporaries were for the most part more single minded in their didactic concern. In them, as in critics for centuries before, literature's meaning is dependent upon the unquestioned universal precepts furnished to literature's particular fictional examples by moral philosophy. Indeed, literature was to be kept morally secure by being brought by moral philosophy into its firmly held ontological precincts.

Beginning late in the eighteenth century, the inflated humanism of Romantic and post-Romantic consciousness sought to replace the guidance of a metaphysically ordained morality with emanations from the poetic imagination of the man – god – poet. But though the source of morality may shift from the cosmos to the single (though crucially representative) mind, the overriding char-

acter of those formal impositions – which are moral impositions – upon human experience, and thus human art, is unchallenged. Whether it comes to us in the subtle delicacy of Kant's claim that 'the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good', or is trumpeted in Shelley's over-confident pronouncement that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', the common elements of this aesthetic still put forward the signs of membership in the 'moral gang' by insisting on the dominance of the formal impulse and on the inevitable place of the moral within the formal. For the making of forms *is* the making of laws, human laws which, as forms, capture and tame the vagaries of wayward human experience. In its bewildering variety of manifestations throughout the nineteenth century, formalism – even at its most extreme – maintains itself as moralism, whether blatant, surreptitious or inverted.

Still, I do not mean to underestimate this shift, beginning in the late eighteenth century, from cosmic forms to forms invented by human creators as the source of moral authority. Though it seemed to leave the moral function intact, this shift of authority, with its loss of ontological security, carried that which eventually would threaten the moral function itself. And it did from the first imply the separation of that moral function from the well-ordered precincts of moral philosophy, with its conformist ideological consequences. For it was a shift from the authority of moral philosophy as a body of universally binding doctrines whose justification must ultimately be theological, to the authority of an individual poetic imagination. Of course, since the latter was sanctioned by a transcendental idealism, it was trustworthy and not just wayward, so that a quasi-theological authority was still at least implicitly present. Nevertheless the essentially humanistic metaphysic has been proved by history to be far more flimsy, leaving – in our time – no objective supporting structure to which poetry's moral claims can be tied. But my brief historical survey has not yet brought us to this, our present desperate moment.

The freeing of literature from its subservience to moral philosophy – and hence to the ideologies of system – did for a while produce a new, and profoundly vital, moral function for literature as a replacement for a philosophy whose potential for private guidance had been discredited. We have seen that criticism of older, more secure times, confident of the truths of the moral philosophy behind it and confident too of the authority of philosophical universals to bring the errant particulars of human experi-

ence into line, could assign to literary works the role of presenting, in their particular cases, exemplary demonstrations of those general truths. It was the obligation of those works to show those particulars as having been brought into line, shaping the fiction accordingly into order to tame them. But more recent criticism – specifically that twentieth-century criticism that inherits but transforms the project initiated by the Romantic and idealist thinkers – sees literary fictions as subverting those universals through the painstaking development of its particulars as autonomous particulars. This is, essentially, the move we associate with the New Criticism.

That move seems to come out of the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness as originally developed by Kant. That is, Kant is taken as defining the aesthetic by distinguishing it from practical reason, as well as from pure reason – practical reason being the realm of interest as guided by the human faculty of will: in short, the realm of the moral. To define the aesthetic by its functioning apart from any interest external to it – to define it as disinterested – would appear to exclude the realm of the moral and hence the ideological, from art. But in the hands of the post-Kantians of our century it has worked quite otherwise.

It is surely true that writers as different as Schopenhauer, Yeats, Croce, Bergson, Hume, Ransom and Tate treat the will as fatal enemy to poetry, thereby separating the aesthetic in literature from Kant's notion of the practical, from the satisfaction of human interests. The suspension of the will – which is for them a proper consequence of the aesthetic – leads to the rejection of moral philosophy, as a system of universal principles to guide action, since it must be seen to be an unwelcome intruder whose authoritarian nature would disrupt, and then distort, the free play of particularity which only aesthetic disinterestedness can permit. Literary works, then, demonstrate their aesthetic freedom (from interests, as defined by ideological systems) by exploiting the errant (that is, the system-defying) nature of their particularities, by subverting the potentially applicable universals which they may bring to mind. And these subversions occur not only within the fictional action but also within the language, the artistic conventions and the very tropes of the work as these strive to establish a unique system of aesthetic play.

But such a subversion of ideological universals has important consequences for our moral awareness, especially since twentieth-

century thought has provided an alternative tradition of making moral claims that can arise only where moral philosophy proper has been subverted. I am referring, of course, to the existentialist–personalist tradition that flourished some decades back, a tradition which thrives only on the anti-Hegelian rejection of universals. It sees the moral universals of systematic thinking as denying the unique subjectivity of the person, imposing a death–dealing totalitarianism of spirit that reflects differentness, settling for a conformism projected outward to posit an ontological structure of enslavement. In an analogous way, it sees the universals of normal language as similarly life denying, so that they must be subverted by the playful deviations of language-become-literary in quest of its own uniquely particular – which is to say self-justifying – authority as a verbal system. By blurring the analogy, modernist critics in this line of thinking find a natural alliance – indeed a similarity of interest and, finally, a two-sided identity – between the post-Kantian aesthetic assault on moral will, its consequences for a too-controlled language and the existentialist–personalist assault on external moral authority (or, as they might prefer to say, on universal authoritarianism).²

This union of interests between a post-Kantian aesthetic and an anti-Hegelian existentialism leads on both sides to a flight from moral imperatives, at least from giving those imperatives the role of emerging – without being undermined – from literary works. But this is not – as it might at times seem to be – a flight from moral sensibility itself as the appropriate atmosphere in which the work is to draw its breath. Indeed, in the existentialist – personalist context it is anything but such a flight. It is, instead, a claim that literature is the only discursive equivalent for experiential particularity; that is, it alone is faithful to our moral experience in its infinite contingency, the only language created to match that experience. In this view, literary works are to furnish paradigms of the self-defeating fraudulence of universals, thereby precluding the extraction of any moral proposition upon which practical decisions can be based. But, it is claimed, only the irreducibly unique case can provide authentic moral insight, and only literature has the language and the narrative manipulation to confront the irreducibly unique case and to protect its irreducibility.

So, far from being divorced from moral considerations, literature is seen to have an indispensable moral function, one now its own since it no longer requires the external authority of a universal

proposition to sanction its particular case. Literary form, viewed from the limited vantage point of moral universals, is seen as grounded in a structure of oppositions in which neither side yields – provided we interpret fully enough – so that each would-be universal claim is undermined by its antithesis, and there is no all-resolving synthesis. In this way literature does find a moral objective in the wake of the abandonment of any possible universally applicable moral philosophy, for there no longer are any categories that dare speak an imperative. Yet, of course, this is for literature the most ambitious and exclusive claim for a moral function that any discourse could make, even if it is one ideologically slanted toward the alienation of individual rebellion. Since my book of some years back, *The Tragic Vision* (1960), arises out of such a post-Kantian–existentialist posture, at once formal and thematic, there is little question that – however much its existentialist energy depended on the exploding of moral structures – it most strongly maintained me as a stalwart, if defiant, member of ‘the moral gang’, though hardly an ideological gang like that specified by Conrad.

We see, then, how completely moral philosophy has been removed from its ideological role as guide to otherwise errant literary fictions, but also how completely the removers, our romantic critics, still the moral gang, retain their commitment – however heterodox – to both the moral, and hence ideological, function of literature and the moral function of their criticism. If moral discourse is seen as an empty and fraudulent exercise of a failed language, literature is salvaged for language as the one kind of discourse in which words still struggle toward creating a fully human meaning.

It is just this privileging of literature which our newer criticism these days would deny, as it would extend the demythification of language from philosophy to all writing, including what had been set aside as the special mythic preserve of literature. Just as the combined post-Kantian and existentialist tradition, as I have described it, would empty moral philosophy of meaning while keeping only poetry full, so its theoretical successors would empty poetry as well, demystifying it with other discourse, and on the same principles. We are now to be as wary in literary works as in philosophical ones of a naïve logocentrism that persuades us to ascribe reality to the references of words as if it was literally contained within them. (This is another version of the warning against ‘existential projec-

tion' from the order of words to the order of world made by Northrop Frye in another context some years back.) Consequently the literary work must be deprived by them of its claim to illuminate our moral experience, as it is seen to join other discourse – including moral philosophy, of course – in only pretending to a revelation (or at least reference) from which its semiotic character actually shuts it off.³ So much, then, for the relation of literature to moral philosophy as a live and fruitful subject, now that both of them have been disposed of as claimants to moral knowledge of human existents. Has all that the history of criticism taken so seriously for so long been demythified, demystified and deconstructed away? Is there nothing left except for us to examine the history and the nature of our deceptions and self-deceptions?

I must admit that, in this newly changed theoretical moment, I have modified my own claims to which I have before referred, so that now I speak less of the existential and more of the anthropological – that is, I speak less of poetry's licence to reveal the actual moral contingencies that the ideological abstractions of philosophy must ignore and thus misrepresent, and speak more of poetry's licence to create complex illusions which provide us with visions of the shape that our own action-guiding fictions, private or collective, may take. This may seem to be a niggling difference, though I see it as an important theoretical change that permits me to concede a sceptical view of the revelatory capacity of language, even literary language (if we still can distinguish a literary function), the need to shift from the meanings of words to the dizzying and obfuscating functions of words. But it is also my way of suggesting that – whatever recent language theory may do to deny the humane missions we confidently used to give to our several kinds of discourse, and especially the literary – the moral and, yes, ideological spurs to our speaking and writing are still with us, leading us to smuggle in those concerns, even if we do so under alien permits that might point toward excluding them. Such an assertion might itself seem to be a self-serving anthropological assumption of mine, except that I believe it is justified by our careful reading. Even in those theories that most try to lock textuality away from the world, within itself, those theories that are least permissive about what texts can tell us about their ostensible referents, we can find at work indirect claims for privileged philosophical and ideological meanings, though – as with deconstructionists – they may be negative ones, representing un-

spoken negative visions. In the hands of a daring and ambitious critic, I mean to argue, poetics does not remain purely descriptive or semiotic; instead, it narrows into the realm of privilege and spreads into the realm of the thematic. It subliminally invokes attitudes that we can think of as moral, or even ideological.

I am speaking about the thematising that occurs even within those theories apparently least concerned with – or perhaps most concerned to deny – any legitimate thematic dimension for literature or its criticism: I mean, then, to turn anti-thematic theories on themselves, to watch them turn themselves thematic. And, having suggested the thematic underside of a number of theories, I will then move on to propose some thematic genres for them. I now suspect I may have been more accurate than I knew in describing more theories than my own – many not yet invented – when, years ago in *The Tragic Vision*, I described 'thematics as the study of the experiential tensions which, dramatically entangled in the literary work, become an existential reflection of that work's aesthetic complexity'.⁴ Of course, in most current theories the situation is the reverse, since in *The Tragic Vision* I was centrally concerned with 'thematics' while today theories are ostensibly concerned with the verbal level of writing at the expense of existential reflection. But I believe my observation holds: purely semiotic studies, those that perceive the textual or intertextual as a systematic sequence of signifiers, seem to impose even upon the most stubbornly antithematic commentator, even today, a thematic analogy, often unguarded, that thrusts itself into the critic's company. The difference is that my own existential interest, a couple of decades ago, allowed me to be more candid and less embarrassed in seeing it there. Indeed, in my desire to escape the charge of escapist formalism, I wanted to see it there.

Today, though my semiotic awareness makes me also more distrustful about the poem's revelatory powers, I remain all too aware of the thematic implications of my own aesthetics of illusionary presence. I now mean my criticism to dwell upon the literary work as a self-conscious fiction: to dwell upon the ways by which the work, operating within our moment of aesthetic perception, persuades us of a metaphorical identity among its elements while reminding us, through its self-reference, that this feat can be worked only within such a moment and with the reader's complicity. It is, then, an identity that calls itself illusionary, that acknowledges another (also illusionary?) realm of difference that affirms its

aesthetic power of presence while denying itself any ontological substance. In effect, it warns against our projecting it beyond itself and into the realm of human existence.

Yet how can I not acknowledge that such a theoretical approach favours those literary works which are most self-conscious about their artifice, those works which most emphasise the elements of their reality which would dissipate themselves into the transient evanescence of phantoms, thereby dissolving our certainties and loosening our grip on our world? Can I refrain from seeking to turn all the works I treat – in so far as I wish to make them worthy of my admiration – into works tending in this direction? Can I refrain also from imposing certain privileged themes that reduce reality to appearance, accompanying them with a privileged metaphysic or anti-metaphysic, and finally a privileged conception of paradox as the moral problematic, dwelling on moral dilemmas and their inevitability? All these, of course, have ideological consequences, leading to an implied liberality of moral judgement, the anti-authoritarian consequence of seeing the harsh, repressive inadequacy of universals, each undone by a paradoxical counter-movement.

Further, there is in my theory an implicit demand for aesthetic form that calls for the fulfilment of the obligation – the moral obligation – upon man as form-maker to impose shape, however fictional, upon the unformed data of experience. As with Matthew Arnold, poetry becomes the last resort for a culture whose moral psychology – after the death of its gods – requires the soothing power of myth, though now accepted only as myth and no longer as a falsifiable fact. So, however much in retreat, I represent 'the moral gang' still, and in this variety of ways. I have been this confessional about the thematic underside of my own theorising in the hope that this lengthy recital can act as an example for equally unwelcome suggestions that create similar doubts about other recent theories which may be at least as anxious to avoid the charge of thematising their linguistic or semiotic claims. I should like to propose similar suggestions about a number of these theories.

In light of my earlier discussion, it should not be hard to establish that extensions of the New Criticism – however outwardly formalistic – would be heavy with thematic implications. Ambiguity or paradox as a New Critical verbal and structural principle can easily become thematically over-determined and slide into a description of how things are in the moral and metaphysical

universe, as all of existence turns duplicitous. These days this seems obvious enough. More significant, perhaps, is the spatialisation of the temporal in the New Criticism, which can turn into the thematic mythification of history.

For example, Joseph Frank's well-known claims about 'spatial form' may be seen shifting all too easily from words to existence: from the effect of simultaneity achieved by the juxtaposition of successive verbal units to the collapsing of several historical moments into the archetype of an ever-returning eternal present. Following the example of Eliot's poetry and applying Eliot's religious mysteries, Frank blurs and then substantialises the analogy between the breakthrough of time by poetic words seeking form and the breakthrough of time by history seeking a transcendent eschatology. Thus for Frank the poem works 'to undermine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time'. In this way 'Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition.' But in this second quotation the terms are becoming ambiguous, in that they can refer either to simultaneity as it affects verbal sequences or to the actual dissolving of historicity ('By this juxtaposition of past and present . . . history becomes ahistorical'). In the passage which follows, Frank completes the thematic transfer: 'What has occurred, at least so far as literature is concerned, may be described as the transformation of the historical imagination into myth – an imagination for which historical time does not exist, and which sees the actions and events of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes.' It is, he adds, 'the myth of eternal repetition and, in the last analysis . . . the abolition of time'.⁵ I have paused over Frank's work because I thought it would be useful to observe so clear – if naïve – an example of the unannounced transfer from the formal to the thematic. But we may not be surprised to find such an appeal to the spatialising mysteries of simultaneity in this metaphorical projection of the New Criticism.

The more recent deconstructionist strain of American post-structuralism would seem to present a greater challenge to my claim that even purely verbal theories end by thematising themselves, a greater challenge because deconstructionism so strenu-

ously rejects our conventional referential expectations of how words function. But we can point to examples in this criticism in which the apparently unintended glide from purely verbal matters to those which make claims about the human condition is all too similar to Frank's, however great the doctrinal difference between Frank and them. I think especially of Paul de Man's 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' – largely because that essay is as vulnerable to this sort of analysis as it has been influential.⁶ It seems to be the inverse of Frank's, though it no less easily falls into the thematic realm. De Man makes as exclusive claims for the temporal as Frank did for the spatial, attacking just that spatialisation or collapsing of time which we observed in Frank.

For de Man's favoured mode, allegory, what is celebrated in a word is its 'pure anteriority', which renounces 'the desire to coincide' with 'another sign that precedes it', instead accepting its 'temporal difference', 'its authentically temporal predicament' (pp. 190–1). But the last word, 'predicament', opens language outward to the human condition: the fate of being only temporal starts by belonging to a sequence of words but shifts to the consecutive, unrepeatable moments of our lives. And with the prohibition against the spatiality of a return, against any simple repetition, the moments can only run out, following one another to death. So the consciousness of death is in each moment, as from each we fall into 'the temporal void' (p. 203). It becomes the obligation of each of us – and, even more, the obligation of the authentic poet – to acknowledge the separateness of the human subject confronting the 'unbreachable distance' (p. 209) in his temporal predicament, and with it the void, in effect his own death. This he must acknowledge without forgoing its facticity for a mystifying fiction, without, that is, seeking the simultaneity of the repetition that would – unauthentically – spatialise time and so redeem it. Instead of symbolic mystification, allegorical demystification; instead of spatial constructs, temporal deconstruction.

These terms beginning with *de* force upon language a negative relation to human existence, but also – not altogether intentionally – create a negative vision of existence. Still, de Man tries not to yield up his primary dedication to a language that is shut off from existence, as he seeks to remain a linguistic, and not an existential, critic. He would have us retreat from a notion of the 'original self' to the "'linguistic' subject' (p. 199), trading the 'empirical world' for 'a world constituted out of, and in, language' (p. 196), a

language in which 'the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous' (p. 192). For language is hopelessly differentiated from the world and cannot bridge the chasm between them: the temporal void is revealed 'in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral' (p. 203). Consequently, we are told, applying verbal knowledge to the empirical world is an 'impossibility' (p. 203). Accordingly, the poem is to yield to this referential incapacity of language. But since it is also an allegory of man as subject, the poem is being allowed by de Man – in spite of himself – to find a bridge after all, and cross over to thematise itself by illuminating our 'temporal predicament' as existents. The semiotician in de Man cannot abandon the existentialist in him: treating the verbal sign as that which keeps us from touching our existential fate, he is simultaneously showing that language can contain that existential fate, though as a negative vision.

It is true that the more recent de Man has tried to eliminate the much too visible thematic shadow that I have shown trailing his semiotic claims, as he turns the written text more and more within its textual problematic, turning it into its own 'allegory of reading'. But his position, though more markedly influenced by Derrida and free of the terminology we associate with existentialism, is not discontinuous with what I have found in his earlier work. That 'narrow spiral' of language has become narrower and is more consistently shut off from the 'empirical world', so that there would indeed seem to be 'no escape from this spiral' (to use the language of 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', which seems applicable with greater force now). But the continuity of his thought suggests there is still an appeal, though it is more submerged, to the implications of a negative existentialism, and with it a moral appeal to the human obligation to confront the nihilism of the 'void', which, beginning as linguistic, still extends beyond to our 'predicament'. The text before us, trope within trope, trapped within its own figurational turns, returns us always to the problematic of its verbal character and, anticipating our struggle with it, becomes yet another in the endless line of 'allegories of reading', tightening this narrow spiral within which texts – together and apart – wrestle with their own textuality. But in doing so it still reminds us of the nihilistic ground – or rather *unground* – which permits the spiral to turn. The crucial word *allegories*, which de Man retains, will not permit the thematic to be excluded: once allegories are let loose –

even those of reading – the spirals they spin tend to escape their own confines.

Hillis Miller, writing in the spirit of de Man and Derrida, substitutes for the metaphor of the narrow spiral the equally tormenting one of the *mise en abîme*. It represents the principle of infinite regress, what Miller calls 'the Quaker Oats box effect'.⁷ Taken from heraldry, where it represents a shield containing an image of itself, which contains an image of itself and so on, the figure here obviously is to characterise the function of the word within the endless march of words we call textuality: in this infinite regress of words, the word cannot escape its network, and can have no appeal except to what de Man called 'pure anteriority' or 'unreachable anteriority'. Once again it sounds as if what we are hearing is only semiotics and not at all thematics. But we cannot ignore – any more than Miller would want to – the existentially loaded notion of the abyss in the word *abîme*. Being cast into the abyss by the metaphor, we must grant to the word *abîme* its full density as it describes a verbal crisis that is a reflection of our crisis as living creatures.

Nor does Miller flinch from the consequences of verbal gaps and blanks being characterised as an abyss, but a special abyss of the paradoxical sort the heraldic phrase reminds us of:

The paradox of the *mise en abîme* is the following: without the production of some schema, some "icon", there can be no glimpse of the abyss, no vertigo of the underlying nothingness. Any such schema, however, both opens the chasm, creates it or reveals it, and at the same time fills it up, covers it over by naming it, gives the groundless a ground, the bottomless a bottom.⁸

This formulation clearly reveals the heavy freight of thematic content Miller is carrying, no matter how strongly he protests that it is a purely verbal structure and not a content he is accounting for. The elusiveness of discourse traps and displays itself, so that the inevitable linguistic movement toward infinite regress slips into the concept of infinite regress – whose home is in the abyss – with its consequences for our existential vision. Strangely, despite the extravagant differences between the two movements, the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't paradox of this peculiar abyss sounds like an echo of the New Criticism, but so, I believe, does its

thematic consequence. It may be an echo also of the early Miller, whose doctrinal allegiance was quite different from what it is now, but whose concern about 'the disappearance of God' still haunts his theorising.

We now can describe how thematisation – of theory and, through theory, of criticism – takes place: as we watch, what begins as a pristine instrument of verbal analysis takes on substance, and projects itself into a metaphysic that sets out the guidelines of the existential universe which circumscribes first this literary work and then every literary work worth talking about. The analytic method thus is analogised, but the two halves of the analogy invade one another, so that the analogy is allegorised. And the critic's guiding allegory works through figuration until his text becomes its own *figura*.

Viewed this way, the critical text is its own object as much as it is a commentary on a textual object outside itself. But this is very much how recent critical schools, committed to textuality and intertextuality in ways I have described, see the critical text: as no less sovereign than what we used to think of as élite literary texts and in competition with them. We should note that, in the reflexivity of his essay, Miller goes beyond his literary subject and applies the *mise en abîme* to 'uncanny criticism' and to his own work.⁹ Once it turns 'uncanny', criticism plunges into the textual swim, joining – as one among equals – the poem, its precursor poems and fellow 'uncanny' critical works.

Though I have elsewhere rejected the equal primacy (or equal lack of primacy) of poem and critical commentary,¹⁰ it is useful to proceed here as if this now widely held claim had merit. For it is by accepting critical texts as occupying the same level of creativity as the poems they presumably are *about* that we can pursue the moral and ideological implications of recent critical modes. From the beginning of my historical survey in this essay I have been aware that, for the most part, critical theory too often makes no distinction between the question of the ideological claims for poetry and the question of the ideological claims for criticism, so that the first of these two issues is the only one addressed, the latter being dragged along automatically. But the elevation of the status of the critical text – at the expense of the poetic – permits us to ask about the ideological demands it makes as well as those it responds to. And we have seen in what subtle ways criticism has addressed concerns it had thought it taught itself to exclude.

Because I have focused here on the implied thematic interest of theories presumably committed to other interests, I can further isolate that interest by classifying a few critics and movements, placing them, in effect, in thematic genres normally appropriate to literary works. I would suggest, for example, that, trapped in the abyss, the negations of deconstruction represent something like the thematic side of the tragic, or perhaps only the pathetic. I propose this for de Man or Miller. Or, in a theory of spatial form the attempt to transcend history through the all-inclusive moment of myth may be seen as seeking an epic-like totalisation. I propose this for Frank. And my own cherishing of self-conscious illusionary play in language and fiction displays some of the harmless, if hardly innocent, character – I like to think – of a thematic version of pastoral, the genre I propose for myself. The lyric? If I were to include in my discussion the all-absorbing, triumphant romantic ego of a theory of influence like Harold Bloom's, I believe we would be exposed to the critic's version of the lyric. And if, to thwart all of these as well as the very idea of genre, I took account of Bakhtin, we could begin to talk – through the idea of carnival – about the critic's subversion of genres and his thematic dedication to *genera mixta*. Each of these suggestions of possible generic associations, of course, carries thematic and thus ideological implications with it. The history of literature amply demonstrates that formal genres, over-determined thematically as they are, emerge soaked in the ideologies that spawn them.

But I would like to cut short these mere hints of possible generic equivalents before I seem to be advancing them literally, for they seem rather over-schematised. Still, I find it useful to consider them. I have meant only to indicate the extent to which subliminal thematic pressures tend to shape the theoretical and critical texts of our contemporaries in directions not unlike those we find operating in primary literary texts. As I have suggested earlier, these pressures also shape what critical commentary, anxious to reinforce its theoretical commitments, makes of those literary texts it chooses – in response to its own character – to work upon. Commentary proceeds to thematise the text which it first selects and then reflects, thereby becoming – or rather remaking itself into – the thematic genre of the text that preoccupies it. But, since it is also commentary, it is a thoroughly self-conscious version, reflexive as well as reflective. So the critical text can move from the coyness of a pale image of its object text to the arrogance of a

full-bodied substitute or even replacement – or such, at least, is its pretension, one that I have momentarily encouraged here. However autonomous the critical text is licensed to be by current theorists, we still must concede that its object text is what – at least ostensibly – gets it going on its self-assertive, and thematic, path.

This self-assertiveness and its deviousness open criticism to being deconstructed by recent theorist of a very different sort from those discussed so far – social theorists, usually strongly flavoured by political concerns. Speaking strongly for itself from motives that derive from extra-linguistic, or even extra-aesthetic sources – what I have been treating as thematic and, ultimately, moral – criticism becomes an object of study for those theorists, Marxists and some of those influenced by Michel Foucault, who have been hunting for hidden motives, mainly social and political, behind what texts are apparently seeking to perform. They would extend considerably – indeed exclusively – the suggestions I have made about the thematic and ideological underside of theory. For them no critical claim is as nakedly forthright as its explicit argument tries to make it appear to be; none is to be taken at face value, as limiting its argument to its stated intentions. Instead, what criticism has been presenting to its readers is treated as a complex linguistic device whose structures function as subtle instruments of social enforcement, repressing and excluding on the one hand, privileging and crowning as *élite* on the other.¹¹

In this essay I admit I have been suspicious of theorists whose intentions seem directed away from thematic and ideological matters toward purely linguistic ones, and I have tried to expose in them allegiances not openly proclaimed. But the thematic implications I have sought to expose I see as emerging out of the language of the critical texts I have examined, as claims being assumed by the claims being made, and thus as themselves claims also being made. These are still text-bound, then, and part of our interpretation. But, for the social critics I am now introducing one has to break through what a critical text appears to be saying – its structural, post-structural or thematic claims – to the political subtext that is really speaking through the apparent system which it controls. Reality is power, and social critics are Platonists breaking through appearance to reality. So theorists committed to uncover struggles for power nourish (and would foster in others) darker suspicions than mine – suspicions of conspiracies, largely unconscious, on behalf of social-political forces working through

texts. After all, I do not complain about thematising: I do not say that it is bad, only that it is inevitable, so that it is better confronted than denied in one's own work or in other's. For my observations here strongly suggest that all of us, one way or another, are part of 'the moral gang'.

But the theorists of social-political power are far more invidious in their suggestions about the primacy of ideology. Indeed, under their tutelage others have learned to treat the history of criticism (or of literature, or of discourse itself) as a disruptive series of disguised struggles for mastery and institutional domination through the use (or abuse) of the word. And they have introduced the study of texts exclusively as verbal emanations of historic institutional forces either seeking or holding power. Ironically it is a study which is itself repressive, in effect expelling, without embarrassment or self-consciousness, the more conventional study of texts as arguments capable of being attacked or defended on the weakness or strength of those arguments, as if they meant what they said. Instead, the text must always be given the lie by a political subtext which is allowed to overwhelm it. What has emerged is a method of writing critical history that is a radical alternative to what had been the usual way: instead of the history of the succession of argumentative structures which succeed or fail in solving the problems they address, we are to trace the history of the struggles of institutions to gain and maintain power through the manipulation of the discourse they create out of their need.

To return to the ground I so hastily surveyed at the start, we need not search far, in examining writers from Plato to Pope or even Johnson, to find in the mimetic structures and metaphors of their criticism privileged reflections of the social order, as they would have it; the structures and metaphors of their culture as they would preserve it. Their reification of objective systems, metaphysical and moral, which then solicit imitation by poet and critic, serves social-political needs effectively. Still, we must today be concerned about the vast difference between our asking of a theory, what does it mean to say, explicitly or implicitly, and our asking of it, distrustfully, on whose behalf is it saying what it does. The first question assumes a theory to be a systematic representation of claims, while the second would deconstruct that representation, would break through the theory to hidden claims whose representation is being suppressed or disguised, though they are being secretly advocated. To ask the second is to produce an

ideological suspicion that leads to a suspension of our interest in the first, more straightforward, question. If we wish to exhaust the meaning of critical arguments by citing their causes in their collaboration with institutional (or anti-institutional) powers, then our history of criticism can be considerably simplified – and reduced.

Viewed this way, the old New Critics, speaking a language formed by the totalisation of nineteenth-century organicism, can be shown to resemble their forebears in harbouring reactionary social functions for literature, though these serve a later historical moment. They would foster the privatisation of vision, though collectively – if only subliminally – propagating and extending the ideological imperialisms of which Edward Said and Fredric Jameson have written. And more recent criticism, ‘after the New Criticism’, similarly performs its surreptitious service for a retrograde culture when it is carried out by the ‘mandarin’ critics stacked together for attack by Frank Lentricchia.¹² The notions of irony in the New Critics and of textual self-deconstruction in the Yale School are seen as acting similarly to reinforce the status quo by inducing the paralysis that stifles action. Everywhere the ‘political unconscious’ is seen as writing texts that are responsive to its will to power, the varieties of strenuous argument lost in the sameness of retrograde service to ideology. Even current anti-ideological theories are seen to have their sources in ideology, so long as we look with the eyes of this kind of social critic. The intention of such negative theories is converted, for the ideology-seeker makes positive use of all things and all persons – and all texts.

Although through Foucault these social critics maintain their own post-structuralist connections with the realm of semiotics, their ultimate appeal is to historical realities beyond language in the social structures and their material basis, as these determine human behaviour. This is the source of their struggle against all text-bound critics from the New Criticism to deconstruction. Hence, as social-political, these are, indeed, the most moralistic of all the theorists we have discussed. We need not strain to force them toward a thematic statement when they make such statements openly as the other side of any semiotic claim they may make. If I wished to find a thematic genre for them in the literary classification I tentatively put forward earlier for the others, I would have to reach beyond the genres of poetics and assign them to rhetoric, in Aristotle’s sense of that ancient art as one devoted to the powers of persuasion and the persuasions of power. Their

political interest guides their analysis of the work of others – whether of poets or of critics – especially work which most often is seen to violate that interest, as it guides their own work, which apparently seeks to serve it. But presumably their habit of going right for the subtext, whatever the diversions of the text proper, gives them a nose for the rhetorical function both of the texts on which they comment and of the texts which they write. The difference between the two is that their own text, sponsored by their awareness of the rhetorical secret beneath all discourse, is obliged to be self-conscious – whether in fact it is or not – as it unmasks those other texts that presumably do not know themselves. As master explainer, their own text must explain the ground for all texts, including itself, thereby joining the others within a Dantean circle of language, in which all are damned, and none innocent. And the ground which that text has explained falls away, for the deconstructive urge cannot find a place to bring its activity to a halt.

This final turn that should make their own discourse reflexive – and my present one as well – exposes us all to the *mise en abîme* that traps even our motives within language with its many false bottoms. Discourse, deconstructed, is turned inward upon itself again, an insulated, reflexive textuality. Still, the ideologist will remind us, there remain, outside, those desires that would shape language to themselves as they seek to shape history in their direction. These desires would subjugate the text to themselves, the subliminal masters that make us distrust all that is said. But when we try to reduce an alien discourse to desires, as they are turned into words, they are themselves ungrounded, becoming just another ideology of discourse. On the other side, as we have seen, even a scepticism as profound – indeed, as abysmal – as deconstruction's does not foreclose ideology. Thus there is the continual mutual undoing between the deconstruction of texts to extratextual motives grounded in material reality and the deconstruction of texts into the vortex of textuality – though this is a move which can also be seen as ideological, just as the ideological, in order to assert itself, must convert desire to textuality.

In the background all this while there remains also the old-fashioned urge to apprehend what the undeconstructed text is trying to claim, were it given a chance – to apprehend that claim and to judge it as a claim to be true. The text may be seen as a devious ideological instrument indeed, *and* it may be seen as just

one verbal stage in the reflexive series within an unending spiral; but would we still not do well – after registering and remembering our reservation – to let it make its claims and to examine them on their own, as if they were disinterested stabs at the truth? What I have sought to demonstrate here is that, whether as a rhetorical manipulation of language needing to have its subterranean motives unmasked, or as the infinite regress that undermines the very project of verbal representation, or as a series of words making a claim to meaning which asks to be apprehended and agreed with, literature – and the critical language that surrounds and competes with it – work their confusing way into the realm of thematics, make their moral demands, and have their ideological impact.

In the critics upon whom I have commented in detail, words and verbal sequences, at the semiotic level, cannot (or, at least, for these and other critics, do not) form the pure subject of criticism but become an analogy – ultimately a figura – for experiential commitments (indeed, ideological commitments) which they would subvert, but which they manage only to submerge. If I were to generalise from these examples, I would observe that, like its predecessors from whom it differs so remarkably, modern theory, sometimes in spite of itself or sometimes self-righteously, turns thematic. To thematise is to moralise; and to moralise is to ideologise, even if in the negative way of denying any escape from language. Ideology, masking itself as morality – if not moral philosophy – remains very much alive among us and, indeed, within us, capturing us all for ‘the moral gang’ even as we undo the ground on which that gang can plant its flag. Still, as an act of human will, how can writing itself be other than a moral act, and its objects (yes, objects!) be conceived as other than fellow agents, companions to us all?

Notes

1. I examine at length Johnson's struggle with the moral in 'Fiction, Nature, and Literary Kinds in Johnson's Criticism of Shakespeare' and "'Trying Experiments upon Our Sensibility': the Art of Dogma and Doubt in Eighteenth-Century Literature', both in my *Poetic Presence and Illusion: Essays in Critical History and Theory* (Baltimore, Md., 1979) pp. 55–69 and 70–9.
2. I provide a detailed study of the collision of these two traditions in 'The Existential Basis of Contextual Criticism', *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore, Md., 1967) pp. 239–5.

3. I use the term *semiotics* in this essay not as it is used by technical semioticians for whom it addresses the mutual relations between signifiers and signifieds, but as it is used by American post-structuralists who address only the play among signifiers itself.
4. *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation* (New York, 1960) p. 242. In this passage I take great pains to divorce 'thematics' from 'theme' (which I there define as 'the so-called "philosophy" of a work, that series of propositions which we supposedly can derive – or, better yet, extrapolate – from the aesthetic totality that is presented to us', p. 241). So we are far from moral philosophy, locked in a language context that still, in its subtle network of internal relations, relates to our existential condition, and hence to our moral state.
5. Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington, Ind., 1963). The first quotation appears on p. 10 and the others on pp. 59–60.
6. Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, Md., 1969) pp. 173–209.
7. J. Hillis Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure', *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976) pp. 5–31, especially pp. 11–12.
8. 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure', p. 12. Miller's paradoxes remind me of Thomas Mann's in his *Doctor Faustus*. There Mann describes Adrian Leverkühn's late music, *The Lamentation of Dr Faustus*, in which 'the final despair achieves a voice', silence achieves an echo and 'abides as a light in the night'. (The translation is that of H. T. Lowe-Porter, New York, 1948, p. 491.) The similarity – the paradox that allows negation to ground itself – is for me evidence of the intrusion of a lingering modernism in Miller's post-modernist enterprise.
9. Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976) pp. 347–8.
10. See 'Literary Criticism: a Primary or a Secondary Art?', in *Arts on the Level: The Fall of the Elite Object* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1981) pp. 27–48.
11. If this were an exhaustive study, as it is not, I would want to include, as a separate but related group, those Freudians – especially those influenced by Jacques Lacan – whose search for hidden subtexts is psychological rather than political, deriving from private rather than collective drives. But analysis turns thematic – and ultimately ideological – here too. In a representative critic like Shoshana Felman, the commitment to see through the text to a healthy reordering of master – slave relations between the sexes leads to a dissolution of otherness (through sexual self-difference) reminiscent of the French personalist ethic of the 1950s.
12. Among other places in the writings of each of them, see *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1981), and *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, Ill., 1980) for Said, Jameson and Lentricchia, respectively.

2

Construing and Deconstructing

M. H. ABRAMS

This age of critical discourse is the best of times or it is the worst of times, depending on one's point of view; but there is no denying that it is a very diverse and lively time. Never have the presuppositions and procedures of literary criticism been put so drastically into question, and never have we been presented with such radical alternatives for conceiving and making sense of literary texts. Among the competing theories of the last few decades we find reader-response criticism (itself divisible into a variety of subspecies), reception criticism, anxiety-of-influence criticism, structuralist criticism, semiotic criticism and – most ominous to many traditional ears – deconstructive criticism. It was not many years ago that announcements of jobs for professors of literature began to be supplemented by requests for professors of literary criticism. Now we find increasing requests for professors of the theory of criticism – professors, that is, whose profession is metacriticism.

The new theories are diverse in principles and procedures, but in their radical forms they converge in claims that have evoked indignation from many traditional critics. One claim is that it is impossible even to identify anything called 'literature' by establishing boundaries, or specifying features, which set it off from other forms of writing. Another and related claim is that criticism is in no way attendant upon or subordinate in function to the literature which, over the centuries since Aristotle, critics have set themselves to classify, analyse and elucidate; criticism, it is now often said, is a mode of writing which does not discover, but 'produces' meanings of the texts that it engages, hence is equally entitled to be 'creative'. Most dismaying to traditionalists is the claim, diversely argued, that no text, either in its component passages or as an entity, has a determinable meaning and therefore

that there is no right way to interpret it; all attempts to read a text are doomed to be misreadings.

Among these innovations in literary theory and practice, the signs are that deconstruction, based primarily on writings of Jacques Derrida since the late 1960s, will be predominant. Within the last ten years deconstructive criticism has generated a flood of books and articles which exemplify it, describe it, attack it or defend it; the articles appear not only in several journals devoted primarily to deconstruction, but increasingly in the most staid of publications, including the alleged stronghold of the critical establishment, *PMLA*. Its focal centre in America has been Yale University, whose faculty includes those exponents whom their colleague, Geoffrey Hartman, has genially labelled 'boa deconstructors' – especially Derrida himself, Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller. Radiating from that centre, the movement has captivated, in varying degree, a number of younger teachers of literature and many among the brightest of graduate students, including some who have written their theses under my direction. By J. S. Mill's maxim that the opinions of bright people between twenty and thirty years of age is the best index to the intellectual tendencies of the next era, it seems probable that the heritage of deconstruction will be prominent in literary criticism for some time to come.

I shall try to locate the deconstructive enterprise on the map of literary theory by sketching its overlap with, as well as its radical departures from, traditional treatments of literature. It is impossible to do so except from some point of view. I shall try to make allowances for mine, which is that of a traditionalist who has staked whatever he has taught or written about literature, and about literary and intellectual history, on the confidence that he has been able to interpret the textual passages he cited with a determinacy and an accuracy sufficient to the purpose at hand.

I

One must approach deconstructive literary criticism by way of the writings of Jacques Derrida, the founder, namer and prime exemplar of deconstruction-in-general. To be brief about so protean, oblique and tactically agile a writer cannot escape being selective and reductive. It seems fair to say, however, that in terms of the

traditional demarcations among disciplines, Derrida (though he has commented on some literary texts) is to be accounted a philosopher, not a literary critic, and that his writings undertake to reveal the foundations presupposed by all precedent Western philosophies and ways of thinking, to 'undermine' or 'subvert' these foundations by showing that they are illusions engendered by desire for an impossible certainty and security, and to show the consequences for writing and thinking when their supposed foundations are thus undermined.

Some commentators on Derrida have marked in passing that Derrida's conclusions resemble the sceptical conclusions of David Hume. I want to pursue this comparison; not, however, in order to show that, despite his anti-metaphysical stance, Derrida ends in the classical metaphysical position called radical scepticism, but in order to bring out some interesting analogues between the procedures of these two very diverse thinkers. These analogues will highlight aspects of Derrida's dealings with language, emulated by his followers in literary criticism, which are inadequately stressed, both by proponents who assert that Derrida has totally revolutionised the way we must from now on read texts and by opponents who assert that Derrida cancels all criteria of valid interpretation, in an anarchical surrender to textual 'freeplay'.

We can parallel three moments in the overall procedures of Hume and Derrida:

1. The point of departure in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* is that 'nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions', which consist of 'impressions' that are 'immediately present to our consciousness' and the 'ideas' that are the fainter replica of these impressions.¹ Beginning with these as the sole givens which can be known with certainty, Hume proceeds to show that, in all reasoning and knowledge concerning 'matters of fact', we can never get outside the sense-impressions which were his starting point, nor establish the certainty of any connections between the single sense-impressions which constitute immediate awareness. He thus disintegrates all grounds for certain knowledge about the identity of any two impressions separated in time, about the existence of material objects in an external world, about the relation of cause and effect between any two occurrences and about the reality even of 'personal identity' or a conscious 'self'. All these entities and relations, Hume contends, since they cannot be established by demonstrative reasoning from his premised single im-

pressions, are the products of the 'imagination' and of 'custom', and have the status not of knowledge but merely of 'fallacies', 'fictions' or 'illusions'.

To Derrida's way of thinking, Hume's starting point in the *hic et nunc* of a non-mediated, hence certainly known perception would be a classic example of the way Western philosophy, in all its forms, is based on a 'presence', or indubitable founding element independent of language; so that Hume's sceptical conclusions from this given, to Derrida, would be merely a negative counterpart of the cognitive dogmatism that it challenges. As Derrida has put it: 'Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or of a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference.'² Hence, he declares, 'I don't believe that anything like perception exists.' Instead of positing a foundational given, Derrida establishes a point of view. 'The axial proposition of this essay', he declares in *Of Grammatology*, is 'that there is nothing outside the text' ('il n'y a rien hors du texte', or alternatively, 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'³). This assertion is not offered either as the point of departure or as the result of a philosophical demonstration. It functions as an announcement of where Derrida takes his stand – namely within the workings of language itself – in order to show us what standard philosophical problems, premises and intellection look like when viewed from this stance and vantage point. In many of its consequences, none the less, Derrida's counterphilosophical linguistic ploy converges with those of Hume's sceptical philosophy. Hume, premising only single impressions, showed that there is no way to establish identity or causal connections among impressions, nor to match impressions to material objects, a world or a self to which we have access independently of impressions. Derrida, taking his stand within language, disperses the seemingly determinate meanings of terms such as 'identity', 'cause', 'material objects', 'the external world', 'the self', and shows that there is no way to match such terms to a reality to which we have access independently of the language we use to represent it.

Derrida's way of carrying out his project is to offer 'readings' of passages in Western thinkers, from Plato to the ordinary-language philosopher John Austin, in order to reveal their common 'logocentrism'. This term denominates his claim that Western philosophical discourse – and indeed all modes of discourse, since none can escape the use of terms whose significance is 'sedimented' by

their role in the history of philosophy – is predicated on the existence of a logos. The logos is Derrida's overall term for an absolute, or foundation, or ground, whose full, self-certifying 'presence' is assumed to be given in a direct cognitive encounter which is itself unconditioned by the linguistic system that incorporates it, yet relies on it as a foundation. Such a presence, for example, is sometimes posited as an immediately known intention or state of consciousness in a speaker while speaking, or as an essence, or as a Platonic Form accessible to mental vision, or as a referent known in its own being; in any case, it constitutes a 'transcendental signified' which, though inevitably represented by a signifier, is regarded as an unmediated something that is unaffected by the signifying system which represents it.

Derrida's readings are oriented toward showing that any philosophical text can be shown to rely on a ground which is indispensable to its argument, its references and its conclusions, but turns out to be itself groundless, hence suspended over an 'abyss'. Derrida's view, furthermore, is that a logos-centred philosophy is a voice-centred philosophy. In consequence, one of his characteristic procedures, often misunderstood, is to overcome Western 'phonocentrism' (the reliance on the speaking voice as the linguistic mode) by positing an admittedly non-existing 'arche-écriture', 'writing-in-general'. By asserting the 'priority' of writing (in the sense of writing-in-general) both to speech and to writing (in the ordinary sense of putting words on paper), Derrida is not claiming that the invention of writing preceded speech in history; he is deploying a device designed to get us to substitute for the philosophical idiom of speaking the alternative idiom of writing, in which we are less prone to the illusion, as he conceives it, that a speaker in the presence of a listener knows what he means independently of the words in which he expresses it, or that he establishes the meaning of what he says to the listener by communicating his unmediated intention in uttering it.

From his elected stance within language, Derrida replaces the view that language developed by a matching of words to the given world by positing an internal linguistic principle of *différance*. This term, like 'writing-in-general', is offered as a heuristic fiction, in which the 'a' in the written form, Derrida tells us, indicates the conflation of the incompatible senses of the French word *différer* as 'to differ' and 'to defer'. In accordance with the insight of the linguist Saussure that both a signifier and what it signifies are

constituted not by their inherent features, but by a network of 'differences' from other signifiers and signifieds, Derrida posits *différance* as generating internally the differential verbal signs, while deferring the presence of what they signify through endless substitutions of signifiers whose ultimate arrest in a determinate and stable meaning or reference never is, but is always about to be. For according to Derrida, in the lack of any possible 'transcendental', or extralinguistic referent unconditioned by the differential economy of language, there is no stopping the play of meanings. In one of Derrida's formulations: 'The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*.'⁴ Or, in another of his punning, deliberately contrarious terms, which in this case exploits a double etymology, any text, under radical inquisition, 'disseminates': it sows its seed, and in that process loses its seeming semantic determinacy, by scattering into a regress which inevitably involves an 'aporia' – that is, a deadlock between incompatible meanings which are 'undecidable', in that we lack any certain ground for choosing between them.

2. Having reached his sceptical conclusions, Hume finds himself, he tells us, in a condition of 'melancholy' and 'despair', 'affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy'.⁵ Hume's solitude is beyond solipsism, for the solipsist is certain at least of the reality of his conscious self, while Hume is reduced to knowing only present perceptions which yield no implication of a conscious self that knows. From this dire condition he finds himself rescued not by further reasoning, but by the peremptory intrusion of a life-force – 'an absolute and uncontrollable necessity' that he calls 'nature'.

Nature herself . . . cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium. . . . I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

Hume finds that he cannot live in accordance with his sceptical philosophy; yet his impulse to philosophical reasoning is no less compelling than his instinct to participate in human society in accordance with its shared beliefs. As a consequence, Hume finds himself living (and recommends that others should also live) a

double life: the life of human society, and the life of the reason that disintegrates all the beliefs on which social life is based into fictions and illusions: 'Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life.' Yet 'in all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our skepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise.'⁶

Derrida's conduct of language is analogous to Hume's double mode of necessarily continuing to live in accordance with shared beliefs that he is rationally compelled to subvert. Derrida in fact describes the deconstructive enterprise as a deliberate and sustained duplexity – 'a double gesture, a double science, a double writing'.⁷ And in reading texts there is a double procedure, 'two interpretations of interpretation', which play a simultaneous role in life, and which, though irreconcilable, permit no option between them:

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation – which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously [*même si nous les vivons simultanément*] and reconcile them in an obscure economy – together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the human sciences.

For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing.⁸

We mistake Derrida's own procedure if we overlook the fact that his deconstructive readings of philosophical passages involve both these interpretive modes and consists of a deliberate double-reading – we may denominate them as reading₁ and reading₂ – which are distinguishable, even if they are irreconcilable, sometimes concurrent and always interdependent. Reading₁ finds a passage 'lisible' and understandable, and makes out, according to a procedure that he shares with common readers, the determinate meanings of the sentences he cites. (For convenience let us say that in reading₁ he *construes* the passage.) Reading₂, which he calls a 'critical reading', or an 'active interpretation', goes on to disseminate the meanings it has already construed.

Derrida accounts for the possibility of reading by attributing to

différance the production of the 'effect' in language of a fundamental presence – not a real presence, or free-standing existent, but one which is simply a 'function' of the differential play – as well as the production of all the other 'effects' on which the common practice of reading depends, including the 'effects' of a conscious intention, of a specific speech act and a determinate meaning or reference.⁹ In this way, he explains, 'the metaphysical text is *understood*; it is still readable, and remains to be read'.¹⁰ And this standard reading and understanding, though only an initial 'stage', is indispensable to the process of deconstruction.

For example: most of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* presents readings of selected passages from Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*. In great part Derrida, with no lack of assurance, construes these passages as conveying determinate meanings, with tacit confidence that his own readers will assent to his construal – a confidence I find well founded, because Derrida is an uncommonly proficient and scrupulous reader of texts in the standard fashion. In this process, he attributes the writing of the *Essay* to an individual named 'Rousseau', and has no hesitation in specifying what 'Rousseau affirms . . . unambiguously', or what 'Rousseau says . . . clearly in the *Essay*' and 'also invariably says . . . elsewhere' (pp. 173, 184), nor in attributing what the text says to Rousseau's 'intention' to say it, or to what it is that 'Rousseau wishes to say'. In the course of this reading, Derrida paraphrases Rousseau's assertions and identifies recurrent 'themes' in variant phrasings of the same assertion (p. 195; see also p. 133); undertakes to establish the time of his life in which Rousseau wrote the *Essay* on the basis of two kinds of evidence, which he describes as either 'internal' or 'external' to the *Essay* itself (pp. 171, 192); and, though he detects 'massive borrowings' in the *Essay* from earlier writers, affirms the essential 'originality' of Rousseau as a theorist of language (pp. 98, 272, 282). Derrida also accepts as accurate some interpretations of Rousseau's text by earlier commentators, but corrects others which he describes, politely, as the result of 'hasty reading' (pp. 189, 243). And he is able to find Rousseau's text 'readable' in this fashion because the language that Derrida has inherited, despite some historical changes, is one that he possesses in common with Rousseau; as Derrida puts it: 'Rousseau drew upon a language that was already there – and which is found to be somewhat our own, thus assuring us a certain minimum readability of French literature' (p. 160).

Thus far, Derrida's reading proceeds in a way that is congruent with the theories of many current philosophers that communication depends on our inheritance of a shared language and shared linguistic practices or conventions, and that when, by applying the practice we share with a writer, we have recognized what he intended to say, then we have understood him correctly. Many of these philosophers also agree with Derrida that there is no extra-linguistic non-conventional foundation for our linguistic practice which certifies its rules and their application and guarantees the correctness of a reader's interpretation; in justifying an interpretation, when we have exhausted appeals to shared though contingent, linguistic and social conventions, in Wittgenstein's phrase, 'the spade turns'. Derrida's radical innovation does not, therefore, consist in his claim that no such foundation exists, but in his further claim that such a foundation, though non-existent, is nevertheless indispensable, and that in its absence there is no stopping the continuing dissemination of construed meanings into undecidability.

In accordance with this view, Derrida designates his reading – the determinate construal of the 'legibility' of passages in Rousseau – as no more than a 'strategic' phase which, though indispensable, remains 'provisional' to a further 'critical', or deconstructive reading (pp. 99, 149). One of Derrida's moves in this critical reading is to identify strata, or 'strands' in Rousseau's text which, when read determinately, turn out to be mutually contradictory (pp. 200, 237, 240, 245). A number of earlier commentators, of course, have found Rousseau's linguistic and social theories to be incoherent or contradictory, but have regarded this feature as a logical fault or else as assimilable to an overall direction of his thinking. Derrida, however, regards such self-contradictions not as logical mistakes which Rousseau could have avoided, but as inescapable features not only in Rousseau's text but in all Western texts, since all rely on a fixed logocentric ground yet are purely conventional and differential in their economy. In his critical 'sub-reading' of Rousseau's texts, Derrida asserts that their determinate reading always leaves an inescapable and ungovernable 'excess' or 'surplus' of signification, which is both the index and the result of the fact that 'the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely'; a critical reading must aim at detecting the 'relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what

he does not command' (p. 158). Derrida's reading of Rousseau thus repeatedly uncovers opposed meanings between what Rousseau 'wishes to say' and what 'he says without wishing to say it', or between what Rousseau 'declares' and what the text 'describes' without Rousseau's wishing to say it (pp. 200, 229, 238). What Rousseau declares and wishes to say is what is construed by a standard reading; what the text ungovernably goes on, unbeknownst to the writer, to say is what gets disclosed by a deeper deconstructive reading.

Derrida's commentary on John Austin, an ordinary-language philosopher who disclaims any extralinguistic foundation for the functioning of language, couches Derrida's views in terms which bring them closer to the idiom familiar to Anglo-American philosophers. In discussing Austin's theory of a performative speech-act, Derrida points out that all words and verbal sequences are 'iterable', or repeatable in diverse linguistic and social circumstances, with a consequent diversity both in the nature of the speech-act and the signification of its words. Derrida construes Austin to make the claim that the total verbal and social context, in a clear case, establishes for certain the nature and communicative success of a speech-act. Derrida's counter-claim is that we never find an absolutely clear case, in that we can never know for certain that all the necessary and sufficient conditions for determining a specific and successful performative have in fact been satisfied. (In Derrida's parlance, no context is ever 'saturated', so as to make it 'entirely certain', or 'exhaustively determinable', which is 'the sense required by Austin'.¹¹ He stresses especially Austin's reiterated references to the intention of the speaker – necessary, for example, in order to determine a speaker's sincerity and seriousness – as a condition for the success of a speech-act. The speaker's intention, Derrida asserts, is a condition whose fulfilment neither the speaker nor his auditor can know with certainty and one which cannot control or 'master' the play of meaning. Derrida's conclusion is that there can be no 'communication', as he puts it, 'that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable', and no way of achieving certainty about the 'purity', in the sense of 'the absolutely singular uniqueness of a speech act'.¹² To this conclusion Austin himself would surely agree. Language, as a shared conventional practice, cannot provide grounds for absolute certainty in communication; even in the clearest case, it always remains possible that we have got an interpretation wrong. Language,

none the less, is adequate for communicating determinate meanings, in that the shared regularities of that practice can provide, in particular circumstances, a warranted assurance about what someone has undertaken to say. For Derrida, however, it is a matter of all-or-nothing; there is no intermediate position on which a determinate interpretation can rest, for if no meanings are absolutely certain and stable, then all meanings are unstable and undecidable. 'Semantic communication', or the successful achievement of a performative or other speech-act, is indeed an 'effect'; but it is, he says, 'only an effect', and as such incapable of arresting the dispersal of signification in 'a *dissemination* irreducible to *polysemy*'.¹³

In the process of his critical reading, Derrida identifies various features of a philosophical text which inescapably 'exceed' the limits of what its writer set out to assert. One of these features is the use in the argument of key equivocations that cannot be used to specify one meaning without involving the opposed meaning. In Rousseau's theory of language, for example, the argument turns on the duplicitous word 'supplement' (meaning both something added to what is itself complete and something required to complete what is insufficient); in reading other authors, Derrida identifies other Janus-faced terms such as *pharmakon* and *hymen*. Another feature is the presumed reliance of a text on a logical argument which turns out to involve non-logical 'rhetorical' moves. Prominent in Derrida's analysis of the inherent rhetoricity of philosophical reasoning is the disclosure of the role of indispensable metaphors that are assumed to be merely convenient substitutes for literal or 'proper' meanings, yet are irreducible to literal meanings except by applying an opposition, metaphoric/literal, which is itself a consequence of the philosophy which presupposes it. A third feature is the unavoidable use in a text of what are presumed to be exclusive oppositions; Derrida undertakes to undermine such oppositions by showing that their boundaries are constantly transgressed, in that each of the terms crosses over into the domain of its opponent term. Prominent among the many unsustainable oppositions to which Derrida draws our attention is that of inside/outside, or internal/external, as applied to what is within or outside the mind, or within or outside the system of linguistic signs, or within or outside a text (a book, a poem or an essay) which is ostensibly complete in itself.

Derrida's view of the untenability of the distinction between what is inside or outside a text has had, as we shall see, an especially important impact on the procedures of deconstructive literary criticism. 'What used to be called a text', Derrida says, has 'boundaries', which were thought to demarcate 'the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus'; such a designation, however, applies only on the condition that 'we accept the entire conventional system of legalities that organizes, in literature, the framed unity of the corpus', including the 'unity of the author's name . . . registration of the copyright, etc.'¹⁴ Derrida's double-reading, reading₁ and reading₂, in fact produces two texts. One is the text, such as Rousseau's *Essay*, which he reads by accepting, in a provisional way, the standard conventions and legalities that establish as its boundaries the opening and closing lines of its printed form. Text₂ is produced 'by a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a "text", of what I still call a "text", for strategic reasons'. This second text is 'no longer a finished corpus of writing' by a particular author, but a text as an aspect of textuality in general – of 'a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces'. Text₂ however, does not simply annul the constraints and borders that function in the reading of text₁, for though it 'overruns all the limits assigned to it so far', it does so not by 'submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex'.¹⁵

This last quotation brings out what is overlooked by commentators who claim that Derrida's emphasis on 'freeplay' in language is equivalent to 'anything goes in interpretation', and that is his repeated emphasis that a deconstructive reading₂ does not cancel the role of intention and of the other conventions and legalities that operate in a determinate reading of a limited text, but merely 'reinscribes' them, as he puts it, so as to reveal their status as no more than 'effects' of the differential play.¹⁶ Derrida insists that the standard mode of 'doubling commentary' – a commentary, that is, which simply undertakes to say in other words what it is that the author undertook to say – 'should no doubt have its place in a critical reading'. 'To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies [that is, of reading₁] is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this

respect, critical production [that is, reading₂] would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything.¹⁷

The deliberate anomaly of Derrida's double interpretive procedure, however, is patent. He cannot demonstrate the impossibility of a standard reading except by going through the stage of manifesting its possibility; a text must be read determinately in order to be disseminated into an undecidability that never strikes completely free of its initial determination; deconstruction can only subvert the meanings of a text that has always already been construed. And even if a reader has been persuaded that Derrida has truly discovered a force in language (seemingly unsuspected, or at least unexploited, before Nietzsche) which forces him to overrun all the constraints and borders of standard construal, he has no option except to begin by construing a text, including Derrida's own text; or more precisely, his only option is whether or not to read French, or English, or any other natural language.

3. In addition to subverting all the convictions of our common life and common thought, and asserting the inescapable need for a double life and double thinking, Hume's epistemology contains a third moment that has an analogue in Derrida's theory of language. This is the moment when Hume turns his scepticism back upon itself, by what he calls 'a reflex act of the mind' upon 'the nature of our understanding, and our reasoning'. In doing so he finds himself involved in 'manifest absurdities' and 'manifest contradictions', including the absurdity that his sceptical argument has no recourse except to use reason itself in order 'to prove the fallaciousness and imbecility of reason'. Hence 'the understanding . . . entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in [sceptical] philosophy or common life'.¹⁸ As the only reasonable way to cope with the diverse illogicalities of his philosophical and his social life, Hume recommends that we replace 'the force of reason and conviction' by an attitude of insouciance – 'a serious good-humor'd disposition', and a 'careless' (that is, carefree) conduct of philosophy, and a diffidence about the conclusions reached by that philosophy. 'A true skeptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction.'¹⁹

In a parallel way, Derrida turns deconstruction back upon itself. Since, he says, it has no option except to take all 'the resources of subversion' from the logocentric system that it subverts, 'decon-

struction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work'. Even the assertion that the play of writing is incomprehensible by the categories of 'the classical logos' and 'the law of identity' cannot escape reference to the logocentric logic that it flouts; and 'for the rest', he allows, 'deconstruction must borrow its resources from the logic it deconstructs'. In addition, as Derrida says, his own deconstructive 'production is necessarily a text'.²⁰ Hence in his writing about writing, Derrida has no option except to 'communicate' his views in language intended to be understood determinately by his readers, knowing that, to the extent that his own text is understood, it becomes a victim of the dissemination it asserts. The 'work of deconstruction', then – since it is forced to use linguistic tools which are themselves deconstructed by the work they perform, in a play of illogicalities which cannot be named except by the logic it undermines – cannot escape the 'closure' of logocentrism; it can only provide the 'crevice through which the yet unnamable glimmer beyond the crevice can be glimpsed'. And to this glimpse of what Derrida can designate only by terms borrowed from the logocentric system – 'the freeplay of the world', 'genetic indetermination', 'the seminal adventure of the trace' – he too recommends that we assume an attitude. This is not, in his case, Hume's attitude of urbane 'carelessness', but a Nietzschean attitude of gaiety: a 'joyous affirmation' which is 'without *nostalgia*', 'with a certain laughter and with a certain dance'.²¹

Where, according to Derrida, does deconstruction leave both our ordinary use of language and the philosophical and other specialised uses of language? Apparently, pretty much where they are now. He disclaims any possibility of a superior truth which would allow us to replace, or even radically to reform, our current linguistic procedures. 'Deconstruction', he insists, 'has nothing to do with destruction. . . . I believe in the necessity of scientific work in the classical sense, I believe in the necessity of everything which is being done.'²² He does not, he says, 'destroy' or set out to 'discard' concepts; he merely 'situates' or 'reinscribes' them in an alternative system of *différance*, in order to reveal that they indeed function, but only as 'effects' which lack absolute foundation in an ontological given. What he can be said to reveal, in a change of vocabulary, is that the communicative efficacy of language rests on no other or better ground than that both writers and readers tacitly accept and apply the regularities and limits of an inherited social and linguistic contract.

II

Derriada has attracted little sustained comment from English and American philosophers, and that comment has been, with few exceptions, dismissive. One reason is that his writings, in addition to being abstruse, variable in procedure and inveterately paradoxical in the give-yet-take of their 'double gestures', are also outlandish. I do not mean only in the sense that they employ what, to the mainstream Anglo-American philosopher, is the foreign idiom of continental philosophy from Hegel through Heidegger. They are outlandish also because there is an antic as well as a sober side to Derrida's philosophical writings. He likes to give rein to his inventive playfulness in order to tease, or outrage, philosophers who regard the status and role of philosophy with what he takes to be excessive seriousness. He is fond – increasingly in recent publications – of exploiting Janus-faced neologisms, deliberately far-fetched analogues, bizarre puns, invented etymologies, straight-faced and often sexual jokes, and dextrous play with his own signature, and also of intercalating incongruous texts by diverse authors, in order to shake, shock or beguile us out of our ordinary assurance about the enabling conditions that establish the limits of a textual entity or yield a determinate and stable interpretation.

It is not on Anglo-American philosophy, but on Anglo-American literary criticism that Derrida has had a strong and increasing effect. Some reasons for this specialised direction of influence are obvious. Derrida's examples of textual readings became widely available to English readers in the 1970s, when what was called the 'New Criticism' was some forty years old. The New Criticism was only the most prominent mode of a procedure that had dominated literary criticism for almost a half-century, namely the elaborate explication, or 'close reading', of individual literary texts, each regarded as an integral and self-sufficient whole. A representative New Critic defined a literary work as a text which, in contradistinction to 'utilitarian' discourse, uses a language which is metaphorical and 'ambiguous' (that is, polysemous, multiply meaningful) rather than literal and univocal, to form a structure which is a free-standing organisation of ironies and paradoxes, instead of a logically ordered sequence of referential assertions. By the mid-1970s this once-innovative critical procedure had come to seem confining, predictable, stale. The very features of what Derrida

calls his 'style' of philosophical reading which made him seem alien to Anglo-American philosophers – his reliance on the elaborate analysis of particular texts, his stress on the covert role of metaphor and other rhetorical figures, his dissemination of ostensibly univocal meanings into paradoxes and aporias – made his writings seem to Anglo-American critics to be familiar, yet generative of radically novel discoveries. Far from offering his style of reading philosophical texts as a model for literary criticism, however, Derrida has emphasised its subversion of the metaphysical conception: there are no features, metaphorical or other, which distinguish a specifically literary use of language; and dissemination, he insists, is 'irreducible' to polysemy (a set of determinate meanings), for dissemination is an 'overloading' of meanings in an uncontrollable 'spread' that cannot be specified as a finite set of determinate signifieds.²³ Critical followers of Derrida have none the less assimilated deconstruction to their pre-existing critical assumptions and procedures. The result has been in various degrees to domesticate, naturalise and nationalise Derrida's subversiveness-without-limit, by accommodating it to a closer reading of individual works which serves to show, as Paul de Man has put it, that New Critical close readings 'were not nearly close enough'.²⁴ The process is well under way of providing a rival deconstructive reading for each work in the literary canon which had earlier been explicated by one or another New Critic.

What we tend to blanket as deconstructive criticism is in fact highly diverse, ranging from an echoing of distinctive Derridean terms – 'presence', 'absence', 'difference', 'effacement', 'aporia' – in the process of largely traditional explication, through foregrounding the explicit or implied occurrence in a work of a Derridean theme (especially the theme of writing, or inscription, or decoding), to a radical use of Derridean strategies to explode into dissemination both the integrity and the significance of the literary text that it undertakes to explicate. Instead of generalising, I shall analyse a single example of the radical type – the reading of Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal' by one of the 'boa deconstructors', J. Hillis Miller, in an essay of 1979 entitled 'On Edge: the Crossways of Contemporary Criticism'. I choose this instance because Miller presents his reading explicitly 'to "exemplify"', as he says, the deconstructive mode of literary interpretation;²⁵ because Wordsworth's poem is only eight lines long, so that we can have the entire text before us as we go along;

because Miller specifies some of the theoretical underpinning of his enterprise and is a lucid and lively expositor of its results – and also, I admit, because some of these results will be so startling to ‘old-readers’ as to inject drama into my presentation. My intention is not polemical, but expository, to bring into view some of the unexpressed as well as explicit procedures in this instance of radical literary deconstruction; if my tone is now and then quizzical, that is because it would be both disingenuous and futile to try to conceal my own convictions about the limits of a sound interpretation.

III

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The ‘battle’ between the earlier, metaphysic-bound reading and the deconstructive reading, Miller says, is joined in the alternative answers they offer to the question ‘What does this given poem or passage *mean*?’ (p. 101). Early on in answering this question, he shows that the poem means to him very much what I and other old-readers have hitherto taken it to mean. I quote from Miller’s deft and lucid exposition of this moment in his deconstructive double-reading:

This beautiful, moving, and apparently simple poem was written [by Wordsworth] at Goslar in Germany in the late fall or early winter of 1798–1799. . . .

To have no human fears is the same thing as to have a sealed spirit. Both of these are defined by the speaker’s false assumption that Lucy will not grow old or die.²⁶

. . . the shift from past to present tense [between stanza 1 and stanza 2] . . . opposes then to now, ignorance to knowledge, life

to death. The speaker has moved across the line from innocence to knowledge through the experience of Lucy's death.

The poem expresses both eloquently restrained grief for that death and the calm of mature knowledge. Before, he was innocent. His spirit was sealed from knowledge as though he were asleep, closed in on himself. . . . Lucy seemed so much alive . . . that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die. . . . Then Lucy seemed an invulnerable young 'thing'; now she is truly a thing, closed in on herself, like a stone. . . . unable to move of her own free will, but unwillingly and unwittingly moved by the daily rotation of the earth. (pp. 102–3)

Thus far Miller, with no want of assurance, has read the text, in its parts and as a whole, as having determinate meanings. He has, to use my term, construed the text and gone on to explicate the implied purport of these meanings in ways closely tied to the construal. Here are some features of Miller's reading:

- (1) He accepts the historical evidence that the poem was written by an individual, William Wordsworth, during a particular span of time, 1798–9. And in the assurance with which he construes the poem, it seems that Miller assumes, as standard readers do, that Wordsworth deployed and acquired expertise in the practice of the English Language and of short lyric poems, and that he wrote his text so as to be understandable to readers who in turn inherit, hence share, his competence in the practice of the language and the conventions of the lyric.
- (2) By implicit reference to this common practice, Miller takes it that, whatever the intended thematic relation to other Lucy poems, Wordsworth undertook to write a poem, beginning with the words 'A slumber' and ending with the words 'and trees', which can be understood as an entity complete in itself.
- (3) Miller takes the two sentences which constitute the poem to be the utterance of a particular lyric speaker, the 'I' of the text, and to be about a girl, who is referred to by the pronoun 'she'. And he takes the tense of the verbs in the first sentence-stanza ('did . . . seal', 'had', 'seemed'), as signifying an event in the past, and the tense of the verbs in the second sentence-stanza ('has . . . now', 'hears', 'sees') as signifying a state of affairs in the present – the sustained 'now', that is, of the speaker's utterance.

- (4) He takes the three clauses in the first sentence, although they lack explicit connectives, to be related in such a way that the assertions in the second and third clause make more specific, and give reasons for, the assertion in the first clause, 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. As Miller puts it, perhaps a bit flatly, 'the second line . . . repeats the first, and then lines three and four say it over again' (p. 103). Miller also takes the assertions in the first sentence plainly to imply that the girl was then alive, and the assertions in the second sentence (augmented by the stanza break) to imply that the girl is now dead.
- (5) So far, I think, most standard readers of the poem will concur. Miller also goes on to specify the lyric speaker's state of feeling, now that the girl is dead. Since the second stanza does not advert to the speaker's own feelings, but leaves them to be inferred from the terms with which he asserts a state of affairs, the text allows standard readers considerable room for variance in this aspect of interpretation.²⁷ Miller's statement on this issue seems to me sensitive and apt: 'The poem expresses both eloquently restrained grief for that death and the calm of mature knowledge' (p. 103).
- (6) Note also that Miller reads the poem as a verbal presentation of a human experience which, as he says, is both 'beautiful' and 'moving'; that is, its presentation is ordered – especially in the sharp division of the stanzas between the situation then and the situation now – so as to effect an emotional response in the reader. That experience might be specified as the shocking discovery, by a particular person in a particularised instance, of the awful suddenness, unexpectedness and finality of death.

These are features of Miller's reading of Wordsworth's lyric phase one: the determination of specific meanings in the poem read as an entity. Phase two, the deconstructive reading, follows from Miller's claim that, since literature is not 'grounded in something outside language', the determinate bounds of its meanings are 'undermined by the text itself', in a 'play of tropes' that 'leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning . . . making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries' (p. 101). The intrinsic anomaly of the deconstructive procedure is apparent: in claiming that a determinate interpretation is made impossible by

the text, Miller has already shown that it is possible, for he deconstructs a text that he has already determinately construed.

We find the same double-reading – the first performed, but declared to be in some sense impossible, the second held to be made necessary by the text itself – in Paul de Man, whose deconstructive criticism is often said to be closest in its 'rigour' to the model of reading established by Derrida himself. As it happens, in an essay of 1969 entitled 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', de Man dealt with this very poem by Wordsworth; and he there construes the text in a way that, for all its difference in idiom, emphasis and nuance, approximates the way that Miller, and I, and almost all traditional readers, construe it. In the two stanzas,

We can point to the successive description of two stages of consciousness, one belonging to the past and mystified, the other to the now of the poem, the stage that has recovered from the mystification of a past now presented as being in error; the 'slumber' is a condition of non-awareness. . . .

The curious shock of the poem . . . is that this innocuous statement ['She seemed a thing . . .'] becomes literally true in the retrospective perspective of the eternal 'now' of the second part. She now has become *a thing* in the full sense of its word.

De Man also reads the poem as the utterance of its first-person speaker whose responses we can infer from the way he describes the situation then and the the situation now:

The stance of the speaker, who exists in the 'now', is that of a subject whose insight is no longer in doubt. . . . First there was error, then the death occurred, and now an insight into the rocky barrenness of the human predicament prevails.²⁸

In this early essay de Man goes on to describe the poem he has so read as, in a special sense, an 'allegory'. He thus opens the way to the intricate deconstructive strategy exemplified in his later *Allegories of Reading* (1979): 'The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction.' But such a reading engenders a second-order 'narrative' which he calls an 'allegory' – of which the tenor, by the inherent nature of discourse, is invariably the undecidability of the text itself: 'Allegories are always

allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading.²⁹

To return to Miller's engagement with Wordsworth's text: I shall first list some of the significations into which (forced, he asserts, by an 'inassimilable residue' in the text itself) he disperses the meaning that he has already construed as 'apparently simple'; I shall then go on to enquire into the operations which enable him to arrive at these multiplex and self-conflicting significations.

- (1) 'An obscure sexual drama is enacted in this poem. This drama is a major carrier of its allegorical significance' (p. 105). Miller explains that he applies "'allegorical" in the technical sense in which that term is used by Walter Benjamin or by Paul de Man', with temporal reference to 'the interaction of two emblematic times', that of stanza one and that of stanza two (p. 104).
- (2) 'The possession of Lucy alive and seemingly immortal is a replacement for [Wordsworth's] lost mother', who had died when he was eight years old. It follows that Lucy's 'imagined death is a reenactment of the death of the mother', hence a re-enactment of the loss of 'that direct filial bond to nature' which his mother, while alive, had established for him (p. 106).
- (3) 'Lucy was [line 3] a virgin "thing"'. In fact she was, by Miller's account, a very young virgin thing, in that she was viewed by the adult and knowledgeable male 'speaker of the poem' as possessing a 'prepubertal innocence'. Consonantly Miller interprets 'the touch of earthly years', line 4, to be 'a form of sexual appropriation'; but since time is the death-bringing aspect of nature ('earthly years'), that touch is also 'the ultimate dispossession which is death'. Yet, since Lucy had died so young as to remain intact, 'to be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin' (p. 107).
- (4) 'The speaker of the poem' (signified by 'I') is not, as it initially seemed, 'the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence'. In Miller's disseminative reading of the speaker's temporal transition to knowledge in the second stanza, he becomes 'the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the penetrator, of both Lucy herself (thus also of the mother whom Lucy has replaced) and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death'.

'The speaker's movement to knowledge', Miller remarks, 'as his consciousness becomes dispersed, loses its "I"' (p. 108). The I-as-construed, we can add, is dispersed not only into a 'he' (the knowledgeable male), but also into a 'she', a 'they' (Lucy and his mother) and, as the representative of nature, an 'it'.

- (5) 'Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother. . . . Male and female, however, come together in the earth, and so Lucy and the speaker are "the same". . . . The two women, mother and girl child, have jumped over the male generation in the middle. They have erased its power of mastery, its power of logical understanding, which is the male power *par excellence*' (p. 108).
- (6) Climactically, in his deconstructive second reading, Miller discovers that the poem 'enacts one version of a constantly repeated occidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light. To possess her would be a means of rejoining the lost source of light, the father sun as logos, as head power and fount of meaning. . . . Her actual death is the loss both of light and of the source of light. It is the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless. . . . As groundless, the movement is, precisely, alogical' (pp. 109–10). The poem thus allegorically re-enacts the inescapable dilemma of our logocentric language, and that is the reliance on a logos, or ground outside the system of language which is always needed, always relied on, but never available.³⁰ From this ultimate alogicality stem the diverse aporias that Miller has traced. As he puts it: 'Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions. . . . The reader is caught in an unstillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself' (p. 108).

IV

Now, what are the interpretive moves by which Miller deconstructs his initial construal of the poem into this bewildering medley of clashing significations? In a preliminary way, we can describe these moves as designed to convert the text-as-construed into a pre-text for a supervenient over-reading that Miller calls

'allegorical'. There are, of course, precedents for this tactic in pre-deconstructive explications of literary texts. The old-fashioned close reader, however, undertook to over-read a text in a way that would enlarge and complicate the significance of the text-as-construed into a richer integrity; the novelty of Miller's deconstruction is that in his over-reading he 'undermines', as he says, the text, then detonates the mine so as to explode the construed meaning into what he calls, in one of his essays, 'an undecidability among contradictory alternatives of meaning'.

Miller's first move is to identify in Wordsworth's poem an 'interrelated set of binary oppositions. These seem to be genuinely exclusive oppositions, with a distinct uncrossable boundary line between them' (p. 102). He lists almost a score of such oppositions; among the more obvious ones are 'slumber as against waking; male as against female; sealed up as against open; . . . past as against present; . . . life as against death'. About such linguistic oppositions Miller, following the example of Derrida, makes a radical claim. This is not the assertion, valid for standard readers, that the boundary between such opposed terms is not a sharp line, but a zone, and that the locus of this boundary is not fixed, but may shift between one utterance and another. Miller's claim is that the seeming boundary between each pair of these terms dissolves into what he calls an inevitable 'structure of chiasmus'; that as a result there is 'a constant slipping of entities across borders into their opposites' so as to effect a 'perpetual reversal of properties'; and that this 'cross over' is forced on the reader by a 'residue' of meaning within the text of Wordsworth's poem itself (pp. 110, 107, 101).

When we examine Miller's demonstrations of these cross-overs and reversals, however, we find, I think, that they are enforced not by a residue of meaning in the sentences of Wordsworth's 'A Slumber', but only by these sentences after they have been supplemented by meanings that he has culled from diverse other texts. Miller acquires these supplementary meanings by his next move; that is, he dissolves the 'unifying boundaries' of the poem as a linguistic entity so as to merge the eight-line text into the textuality constituted by all of Wordsworth's writings, taken together. ('His writing', Miller explains, '. . . is what is meant here by "Wordsworth"' - p. 106.) This manoeuvre frees 'A Slumber' from the limitations involved in the linguistic practice by which Miller

himself had already read the text as a specific *parole* by a specified lyric speaker. Miller is now licensed, for example, to attribute to the 'I' in line 1, initially construed as a particular speaker, and the 'she' in line 3 and elsewhere, initially construed as a particular girl, any further significances he discovers by construing, explicating and over-reading passages that occur elsewhere in Wordsworth's total *oeuvre*.

By way of brief example; Miller reads 'other texts both in poetry and prose' as providing evidence that Wordsworth (whom he now identifies with the unspecified 'I' of the poem) 'had as a child, and even as a young man, a strong conviction of his immortality', and that this conviction 'was associated with a strong sense of participation in a nature both enduringly material, therefore immortal, and at the same time enduringly spiritual, therefore also immortal, (p. 103). Miller reads other passages in Wordsworth as evidence that 'nature for Wordsworth was strongly personified', though 'oddly, personified as both male and female, as both father and mother'. He cites as one instance of the latter type of personification the passage of *The Prelude* in which the 'Infant Babe', learning to perceive the world in the security of his mother's arms, and in the assurance of her nurturing love, comes to feel in his veins 'The gravitation and the filial bond/Of nature, that connect him with the world.' Miller interprets this statement to signify that the 'earth was [to Wordsworth] the maternal face and body'. In other episodes in *The Prelude* and elsewhere, on the other hand, nature is 'a frightening male spirit threatening to punish the poet for wrongdoing', hence representative of his father. Miller points out that 'Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, his father when he was thirteen', leaving Wordsworth feeling abandoned by the death of the former and irrationally guilty for the death of the latter. He then cites another passage, this time not directly from Wordsworth but from his sister Dorothy's journal, in which she describes how she and her brother lay down in a trench, and Wordsworth 'thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth and just to know that our dear friends were near'; this remark Miller identifies with Wordsworth's 'fantasy' of Lucy lying in the earth in the second stanza of 'A Slumber' (p. 107).

It is only by conflating the reference and relations of the 'I' and 'she' in 'A Slumber' with these and other passages that Miller is

able to attribute to Wordsworth's text the oscillating, contrarious meanings that Lucy alive was a replacement for the lost mother, while her death re-enacts the death of the mother, hence the loss of the 'filial bond to nature' which his mother had established for him; and the further meaning that Wordsworth's 'only hope for reestablishing the bond that connected him to the world is to die without dying, to be dead, in his grave, and yet still alive, bound to material nature by way of a surrogate mother, a girl who remains herself both alive and dead, still available in life and yet already taken by Nature' (p. 107). And it is only by merging the reference of the 'I' with other passages, interpreted as expressing Wordsworth's sense of participation in an enduring, immortal nature, or as signifying Wordsworth's experience of a nature which is male and his father as well as female and his mother, that Miller achieves the further range of simultaneous but incompatible meanings that 'the speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female . . . is the displaced representative . . . of both Lucy herself and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death' (p. 108).

It might seem that Miller acts on the interpretive principle that whenever Wordsworth uses a narrative 'I' or 'she' in a poem, the pronouns inescapably carry with them reference to everything the author has said, in any of his texts, about himself and any female persons and about their relations to each other and to nature. In fact, however, Miller's procedure is constrained in various ways. It is constrained by Miller's tacit requirement of some connection to partial aspects of the texts as initially construed, as well as by his tacit reliance on plausible bridges for the cross-overs between the 'I' and 'she' and the various personages and relationships that he finds, or infers, elsewhere in Wordsworth's writings. These are primarily doctrinal bridges, whose validity Miller takes for granted, which serve to warrant his 'allegorical' reading – in other words, to underwrite his over-reading of the text of 'A Slumber'. Some underwriters remain implicit in Miller's essay. He relies throughout, of course, on the views, terms and strategies of Derrida. He patently accepts Freud's doctrines about the unconscious attitudes of a male to his mother, father and lover and the disguised manifestations of these attitudes in the mode of symbolic displacements, condensations and inversions. And in his discussion of Wordsworth's lyric as simultaneously affirming and erasing

'male mastery' and the male 'power of logical understanding', Miller manifests a heightened consciousness of the relations of men to women in a patriarchal society, as delineated in recent feminist criticism.

Some of his connective bridges, however, Miller explicitly identifies; and one of these is Martin Heidegger's assertions about the use of the word 'thing' in German. I want to dwell on this reference for a moment, as representative of the way Miller both discovers and corroborates some startling aspects of the allegorical significance of 'A Slumber' as 'an obscure sexual drama'.

Miller cites (and construes determinately) a passage in which Heidegger points out that in German we do not call a man a thing (*Der Mensch ist kein Ding*); and that 'only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood are for us such mere things'. We do, however, 'speak of a young girl who is faced with a task too difficult for her as being a young thing, still too young for it (*eine noch zu junges Ding*)' (p. 104). This is a striking quotation, with its parallel (of the sort Miller is often and impressively able to introduce) between Heidegger's 'a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood' and Wordsworth's triad, 'with rocks, and stones, and trees'. As Miller implies, this sexual asymmetry in the application of the term 'young thing' applies to English as well as German. Among speakers of English, women as well as men are apt to refer to inexperienced or innocent girls, but not to inexperienced or innocent boys, as 'young things'. On this feature of the language Miller largely relies for important elements in his sexual drama. By referring to her as 'a thing', the speaker invests the girl with a virginal innocence – a 'prepubertal innocence', in fact – which nature tries, only half in vain, to violate; by the same epithet, he implicitly stresses his own male difference, and claims superiority over the young virgin in knowledge, experience, physical attributes and logical power; only to have the oppositions dissolved and the claims controverted by implications derived from criss-crossing 'A Slumber' with other texts in Wordsworth.

There comes to mind a familiar folk song in English, not cited by Miller, whose parallel to Miller's disseminative second reading of 'A Slumber' seems a good deal closer than the German passage in Heidegger. In this song the term 'young thing' is again and again applied to a girl who resists (or seems to resist) the advances of an importunate and experienced male. Her age – or rather ages – are

compatible with her being prepubertal, nubile and maternal too:

Did she tell you her age, Billy boy, Billy boy,
 Did she tell you her age, charming Billy?
 She's three times six, four times seven,
 Twenty-eight and near eleven,
 She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.

In the concluding stanza the young thing is represented as vulnerable, acquiescent, yet unpenetrated by her lover:

Did she light you up to bed, Billy boy, Billy boy,
 Did she light you up to bed, charming Billy?
 yes, she lit me up to bed,
 But she shook her dainty head,
 She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.³¹

Now, what is the relevance of the gender-specific uses of 'young thing', whether in German or English, to the third line of Wordsworth's poem – which does not call the girl a 'young thing' at all, nor even simply 'a thing', but that term as qualified by a clause Miller had initially construed to signify that she was a thing so vital 'that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die'? To old readers like myself, they have no relevance whatever. But to a second-order reading which has deliberately cut itself free from the limitations in construing the poem as a specific lyric *parole*, such uses help to endow the text with a diversity of contradictory sexual significations.

There remains the last feature that I have listed in Miller's deconstructive reading of 'A Slumber', the discovery of a general aporia that underlies and necessitates all the local aporias; and to track down this discovery requires us to identify a final interpretive operation. This move (already suggested by Miller's reference to the use of *junges Ding* in German, and by his comment that Wordsworth's 'identifying the earth with a maternal presence' repeats a trope that exists 'in the Western tradition generally' – (p. 109) is to dissolve linguistic boundaries so as to merge 'A Slumber' not only with Wordsworth's other writings, but into the textuality constituted by all occidental languages taken together. In this all-embracing linguistic context, by way of the etymological link between 'Lucy' (a name not mentioned in the poem) and the Latin

lux, or light, the death of a girl is read as enacting 'a constantly repeated occidental drama of the lost sun . . . the father sun as logos, as head power and fount of meaning' (p. 109).

The implicit warrant for this over-reading of the 'she' in 'A Slumber' is a remarkable essay by Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy'. There Derrida undertakes to show that metaphysics is inescapably metaphoric, and that the founding metaphors of philosophy are irreducible. All attempts to specify the literal meaning, in implicit opposition to which a metaphor is identified as metaphoric, and all attempts to translate a metaphor into the literal meaning for which it is held to be a substitute, are incoherent and self-defeating, especially since the very distinction between metaphoric and literal meaning is a product of the philosophical system it purports to found, or 'subsume'. Derrida stresses particularly the reliance of traditional philosophical systems on metaphors, or 'tropes', in which terms for visual sense-perception in the presence or absence of light are applied in what purports to be the mental or intellectual realm. Philosophers claim, for example, that they see the meaning or truth of a proposition, or they distinguish clear and distinct from obscure ideas, or they appeal to contemplative vision and to the natural light of reason; all are instances of standing and gazing before something which compels belief, in the way that we are supposedly compelled to believe in the presence of a thing perceived by our sense of sight. Such mental tropes, like their visual correlates, must assume a source of light, which is ultimately the sun; and with his customary wit, Derrida names this key trope (that is, 'turn') of Western thought – which as metaphor is also an instance of what are traditionally called 'flowers of rhetoric' – the 'heliotrope'; that is, a kind of sunflower of rhetoric. But the visible sun, itself ever turning, rises only to set again; similarly, the philosophical tropes turn to follow their analogous sun, which appears only to disappear, even though, as the source of light, it constitutes the necessary condition for the very opposition between seeing and not-seeing, hence between presence and absence. The sun thus serves Derrida himself as a prime trope for the founding presence, or logos, which by our logocentric language is ever needed and always lost.

Miller, it is evident, has plucked Derrida's heliotrope and carried it over, via the unnamed Lucy, into the text of Wordsworth's poem. (Derrida himself remarked, possibly by way of warning,

that 'the heliotrope may always become a dried flower in a book';³² it may become, that is, a straw-flower.) As a radically deconstructive critic of literature, Miller always knows in advance that any literary text, no less than any metaphysical text, must be an allegorical or 'tropological' vehicle whose ultimate tenor is its constitutional lack of a required ground. And by ingeniously transplanting the heliotrope, he is indeed enabled to read the death of the 'she' in Wordsworth's short lyric as an allegory for 'the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless' (p. 109).

V

Miller introduces his exemplary analysis of Wordsworth's poem in the middle of an essay which begins and ends with a discussion of literary study in the university, and in the course of this discussion he raises a pressing issue for the teaching of literature. He divides the 'modes of teaching literature and writing about it' into two kinds. One kind is the deconstructive 'mode of literary study I have tried to exemplify'; the other comprehends all the more traditional modes. And, he declares, 'both can and should be incorporated into college and university curricula' (p. 111).

I am not at all opposed to incorporating deconstructive theory and deconstructive critical practice as subjects for study in university curricula. They have become the focus of the kind of vigorous controversy which keeps a discipline from becoming routine and moribund, and have had the salutary result of compelling traditionalists to re-examine the presuppositions of their procedures and the grounds of their convictions. The question is: when, and in what way, should this subject be introduced?

Miller's answer is to incorporate it at all stages, 'from basic courses in reading and writing up to the most advanced graduate seminars'. The basic courses are presumably first- and second-year courses. Such early and reiterative presentation of the subject would seem to rest on the conviction that Derrida's theory, which deconstructs the possibility of philosophical truth, is itself the truth about philosophy, and furthermore, a theory capable of being taught before students have read the philosophy on which it admittedly depends even as it puts that philosophy to radical question. And how are we to introduce Derrida's theory and

practice of deconstructing texts to novices at the same time that we are trying to teach them to write texts that will say, precisely and accurately, what they mean, and to construe, precisely and accurately, the texts that they read? In his sustained 'double gestures' Derrida is an equilibrist who maintains a precarious poise on a tightrope between subverting and denying, between deconstructing and destroying, between understanding communicative 'effects' and dissolving the foundations on which the effects rely, between deploying interpretive norms and disclaiming their power to 'master' a text, between decisively rejecting wrong readings and declaring the impossibility of a right reading, between meticulously construing a text as determinate and disseminating the text into a scatter of undecidabilities. In this process Derrida is also a logical prestidigitator who acknowledges and uses, as a logocentric 'effect', the logic of non-contradiction, yet converts its either/or into a simultaneous neither/nor and both/and, in a double gesture of now-you-see-it, now-you-don't, of giving and taking back and regiving with a difference. I find it difficult to imagine a population of teachers of composition and reading who are so philosophically adept and pedagogically deft that they will be able to keep novices from converting this delicate equilibristic art into a set of crude dogmas; or from replacing an esteem for the positive powers of language by an inveterate suspicion of the perfidy of language; or from falling either into the extreme of a paralysis of interpretive indecision or into the opposite extreme of interpretive abandon, on the principle that, since both of us lack a foundation in presence, my misreading is as good as your misreading.

Miller's recommendation to teach deconstruction as a subject to advanced students – after, it is to be hoped, a student has become competent at construing a variety of texts, and knowledgeable about traditional modes of literary criticism, and has also achieved the philosophical sophistication to understand the historical position and the duplexities of Derridean deconstruction – seems to me unobjectionable. No student of literature, in fact, can afford simply to ignore deconstruction; for the time being, it is the focus of the most basic and interesting literary debate. And it is only fair to add that, if a graduate student elects to adopt, in whole or part, this strategy for liberating reading from traditional constraints, it offers, in our institutional arrangements for hiring and advancing faculty, certain practical advantages. It guarantees the discovery of new significations in old and much-criticised works of literature, hence

is eminently publishable; and while, because of the built-in conservatism of many literary departments, it still incurs institutional risks, it increasingly holds out the promise of institutional rewards.

As a long-time observer of evolving critical movements and counter-movements, I am not disposed to cavil with this latest innovation; I do want, however, to express a few caveats. In appraising the old against the new mode of teaching and writing about literature, Hillis Miller declares that the old mode, since it is 'controlled by the presupposition of some center', 'already knows what it is going to find', while the deconstructive mode 'is more open to the inexhaustible strangeness of literary texts' (p. 110). I recognise the justness of the second clause in this claim, but not of the first. As Miller's reading of 'A Slumber' demonstrates, deconstruction has indeed proved its ability to find strange meanings that make the most ingenious explorations of New-Critical old-readers seem unadventurous – although it should be noted that deconstructive readings are adjudged to be strange only by tacit reference to the meanings of the text as already construed. But surely it is deconstructive criticism, much more than traditional criticism, which is vulnerable to Miller's charge, in his first clause, that it 'already knows what it is going to find'. Whatever their presuppositions, traditional modes of reading have amply demonstrated the ability to find highly diverse structures of meaning in a range of works from Wordsworth's 'A Slumber' through Shakespeare's *King Lear*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and the rhymes of Ogden Nash. But as Miller himself describes deconstruction, it 'attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case', following out 'the play of tropes leads to . . . the experience of an aporia or boggling of the mind' (p. 101). This presupposition makes a deconstructive reading not merely goal oriented, but single-goal oriented. The critic knows before he begins to read what, by deep linguistic necessity, he is going to find – that is, an aporia – and sure enough, given the freedom of interpretive manoeuvre that deconstruction is designed to grant him, he finds one. The readers of radically deconstructive critics soon learn to expect that invariable discovery. So one of my caveats is this: for all the surprising new readings achieved *en route*, I do not see how Derrida's counterphilosophical strategy, when transposed to the criticism of literature, can avoid reducing the variousness of literary works to allegorical narratives with an invariable plot.

Another caveat: to be successful in his chosen *métier* the apprentice needs to approximate the proven strengths of the masters of deconstruction: their wide-ranging and quite traditional learning, for example; their quick eye for unexpected similarities in what is taken to be different and of differences in what seems to be the same; their ingenuity at finding openings into the linguistic substructure of a work and resourcefulness at inventing diverse tactics in the undeviating deconstructive quest; and not least, the deftness, wit and wordplay which often endow their critical writings with their own kind of literary value.

My third warning is this: Derrida is careful to point out, as I have said, that deconstruction does not destroy, and cannot replace, traditional humanistic pursuits, including presumably literary criticism; nor can it, as his own theory and practice demonstrate, dispense with a determinate construal of a text, as a necessary stage toward disseminating what has been so construed. Above all, then, the young practitioner needs to be sure that he establishes his credentials (as Derrida, Miller, de Man and other adepts have impressively established theirs) as a proficient, acute and sensitive construer and explicator of texts in the primary mode of literary understanding. Otherwise, as traditional literary readings may degenerate into exercises in pedantry, so deconstructive readings may become a display of modish terminology which never engages with anything recognisable as a work of literature.

My final point has to do with the difference between traditional and deconstructive motives for reading literature, and the distinctive values that each reading provides. To read a text in the traditional way, as a work of literature, is to read it as a human document – a fictional presentation of thinking, acting and feeling characters who are enough like ourselves to engage us in their experiences, in language which is expressed and ordered by a human author in a way that moves and delights the human reader. Deconstructive critics, if they acknowledge such features at all, treat them as unauthored, linguistically generated illusions, or 'effects'. Literature has survived over the millennia by being read as a presentation of human characters and matters of human interest, delight and concern. It is far from obvious that the values in such a reading can for long be replaced by the value, however appealing in its initial novelty, of reading literature as the tropological vehicle for a set of conundrums without solutions.

I am reassured, however, by the stubborn capacity of construed

texts to survive their second-order deconstruction. When, for example, I turn back from Miller's essay to Wordsworth's 'A Slumber', I find that it still offers itself, not as a regress of deadlocked 'double-binds', but as what Wordsworth's friend Coleridge found it to be when he called it a 'sublime elegy', and what Miller himself at first found it to be, when he described it as a 'beautiful' and 'moving' poem – beautiful in the terse economy, justness and ordering of its verbal expression, and moving in that it presents a human being at the moment in which he communicates the discovery, in a shocking instance, of the suddenness, unexpectedness and finality of death. Let us put the text to trial:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Notes

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1928) pp. 67, 73, 197, 265.
2. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, Md., 1970) 'Discussion', p. 272.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976) p. 163; see also p. 158.
4. 'Structure, Sign, and Play', p. 249. See also Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, Ill., 1981) p. 5.
5. Hume, *Treatise*, p. 264.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 183, 269–70.
7. Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', *Glyph*, vol. 1 (1977) p. 195.
8. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', pp. 264–5.
9. See, for example, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', 'Discussion', pp. 270–1; 'Signature Event Context', pp. 174, 193; *Dissemination*, pp. 43–4.
10. 'Differance', in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill., 1973) p. 156.

11. 'Signature, Event, Context', pp. 174, 192. See also Derrida, 'Living on: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (New York, 1979) p. 78: 'Hence no context is saturable any more. . . . No meaning can be fixed or decided upon.' And p. 81: 'No meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.'
12. 'Signature, Event, Context', pp. 172, 186, 191.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 174, 193, 195.
14. 'Living on: Border Lines', pp. 83, 142.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.
16. For example, *Of Grammatology*, p. 243: Rousseau's 'declared intention is not annulled . . . but rather *inscribed* within a system it no longer dominates'. 'Signature, Even, Context', p. 192: in 'a differential typology of forms of iteration . . . the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance'.
17. *Of Grammatology*, p. 158. Derrida adds (pp. 158–9) that the exigencies of standard interpretive commentary, though it is an 'indispensable guardrail', 'has always only *protected*, it has never opened a reading'. A critical reading, however, which recognises that, in the inescapable lack of a 'natural presence', a text 'has never been anything but writing' – that is, 'substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references' – 'opens' meaning and language, as he puts it, 'to infinity'.
18. Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 182, 186–7, 267. Hume's idiom for describing his dilemmas at times converges with that favoured by Derrida. For example, Hume declares in the *Treatise* that in reconsidering his section on the self, or personal identity, he finds, himself 'involv'd in such a labyrinth, that . . . I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent', and ends in the undecidability of what Derrida calls the 'doubt bind' of an 'aporia': 'In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them' ('Appendix', pp. 633, 636).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 270, 273.
20. *Of Grammatology*, pp. 24, 314, 164; also 'Structure, Sign and Play', pp. 250–1: 'We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is alien to this history [of metaphysics]; we cannot utter a single deconstructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. . . . Every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics.'
21. *Of Grammatology*, p. 14; 'Structure, Sign and Play', p. 264; 'Difference', p. 159.
22. 'Structure, Sign, and Play', 'Discussion', p. 271.
23. 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', *New Literary History*, 6 (1974) 48–9; 'Living on', p. 91; *Dissemination*, pp. 25–6. See also 'Signature, Event, Context', pp. 173, 181, 188, 195.
24. Paul de Man, 'Introduction' to the special issue entitled 'The Rhetoric of Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 28 (1979) p. 498.

25. J. Hillis Miller, 'On the Edge: the Crossways of Contemporary Criticism', in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986) p. 110. All subsequent page references to this essay are in the text.
26. Miller identifies the 'she' referred to in the poem as 'Lucy' on the standard grounds that we have convincing reasons to believe that Wordsworth intended 'A Slumber' to be one of a group of five short lyrics – what Miller calls 'the Lucy poems as a group' (p. 106). In the other four poems, the girl is named as 'Lucy', and Lucy, as one of the poems puts it, 'is in her grave, and oh,/The difference to me'.
27. The disagreement about 'A Slumber' between Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson (which E. D. Hirsch has publicised and made a notable interpretive crux) has to do solely with this issue. (See E. D. Hirsch, Jr. *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Conn., and London, 1967, pp. 227–30.) Both readers construe the text as signifying that a girl who was alive in the first stanza is dead in the second; their disagreement is about what we are to infer about the speaker's state of mind from the terms in which he represents the circumstance of her death. Brooks says that the closing lines 'suggest . . . [his] agonized shock at the loved one's present lack of motion . . . her utter and horrible inertness'; Bateson claims that his 'mood' mounts to 'the pantheistic magnificence of the last two lines. . . . Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature, and not just a human "thing"'. Miller's description of the lyric speaker's state of mind seems to me much more attuned to what the speaker says than either of these extreme versions.

Almost all of the many critics who have written about 'A Slumber' agree with Miller's construal of the basic situation – a lyric speaker confronting the fact that a girl who seemed invulnerable to aging and death is now dead; they differ mainly in their explication of the overtones and significance of the presented facts. The one drastic divergence I know of is that proposed by Hugh Sykes Davies, in 'Another New Poem by Wordsworth', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 15 (1965) pp. 135–61. Davies argues against the evidence that Wordsworth intended 'A Slumber' to be one of the Lucy group and suggests that Wordsworth intended the 'she' in the third line to refer back to 'spirit' in the first line; hence that the text is to be construed as a poem about a trance-state of the speaker's own spirit. Such a reading seems to me to be not impossible, but extremely unlikely. What Davies's essay does serve to indicate is that no construal of a poem can, by reference to an infallible criterion, be absolutely certain; it is a matter of adequate assurance, as confirmed by the consensus of other competent readers.

28. Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles A. Singleton (Baltimore, Md., 1969) pp. 205–6.
29. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), p. 205; see also p. 131.

30. As Miller puts it, the poem instances the way in which, in any 'given work of literature . . . metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself' ('On Edge', p. 101).
31. From *The Abelard Folk Song Book*, ed. Abner Graboff (New York and London, 1958).
32. Derrida, 'White Mythology', p. 74.

3

The New Criticism and Deconstruction: Attitudes to Language and Literature

RAJNATH

Both Jacques Derrida and I. A. Richards have taken a great deal of interest in language with the result that language is the central concern of the critical movements pioneered by them. In the present essay I shall first take stock of Richards's and Derrida's attitude to language and then attempt a comparison between the practitioners of the New Criticism and deconstruction.

I

Language, especially the way words convey their meaning both in and outside literature, has been a major preoccupation of I. A. Richards. Making use of the premises of associationism, Richards has evolved his own concept of language. The main tenet of associationism that Richards has adopted is that words refer to objects. This referential use has also been designated symbolic use where meaning is 'delegated efficacy' in that words convey their meaning by virtue of their being 'substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there'.¹ That is to say, words refer to objects which are absent and thus become symbols for them.

Where Richards differs from the associationist view of language is in refuting that (a) words bring to our minds images of particular objects; for example, the word 'cat' will bring to one's mind a particular cat that one has seen, and (b) words have built in them some kind of semantic core; for example, the sound 'fl' in words like flash, flare, flame, flicker suggests a 'moving light'. Richards agrees with Aristotle that 'there can be no natural connection

between the sound of any language and the things signified'.² Though words refer to objects, the relation between the two is arbitrary, as the same object can be described by another word. We can even say dog and think cat.

Richards also differs from the associationists in maintaining that words cannot be viewed in isolation from the sentence in which they are used. Words do not constitute a sentence as bricks form a wall. The meaning of a word is influenced by the other words with which it is placed in a sentence generating what Richards calls 'interanimation of words'.³ In *The Meaning of Meaning* he goes to the extent of saying that words do not have meaning in isolation:

Words as everyone now knows, 'mean' nothing by themselves, although the belief that they did . . . was once equally universal. It is only when a thinker makes use of them that they stand for anything, or, in one sense have meaning.⁴

Richards does not take such an extreme position in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, but all the same believes that 'no word can be judged as to whether it is good or bad, correct or incorrect, beautiful or ugly or anything else that matters to a writer in isolation'; which is to say that though words can have meaning in isolation, their true significance is determined only when they are used in a sentence where they are acted upon by other words. If the associationist approach to language is mechanical, that of Richards, like Coleridge's, is organic. Instead of viewing fixed meanings of words, the organic approach believes that a sentence is, to borrow a metaphor from Coleridge, like a plant where words act upon and determine each other's meaning.

According to Richards, words are influenced not only by the other words in a sentence but also by those which are absent. In the first place, words sharing a morpheme, that is having some similarity in both meaning and sound, will recall each other. A word like *flash* will recall words like *flare*, *flame*, *flicker*, even though they are absent from the sentence where the word *flash* occurs. Secondly, words sounding alike, but not sharing a common meaning, will recall each other. For example, *blare* will recall *scare* and *dare*. Thirdly, words which do not sound alike but share a meaning will bring to mind each other. These are the words that might have

been used instead of the one actually used. And, fourthly, different uses of the same word will back up each other. The same word can be used in so many different senses in so many different contexts, and these different senses of the same word act upon each other. Thus Richards comes to the conclusion that 'the meaning of a word on some occasions is quite as much in what it keeps out, or at a distance, as in what it brings in'.⁵

Having discussed Richards's view of language in general, we can now turn to his reflections on the language of literature, particularly poetry. Throughout his critical programme Richards has distinguished between the scientific and emotive uses of language. In *The Meaning of Meaning* he writes:

The symbolic use of words is *statement*, the recording, the support, the organization, and the communication of references. The emotive use of words is a more simple matter, it is the use of words to express or excite feelings and attitudes.⁶

The scientific use exploits the referential or denotative property of words, while the emotive use disrupts them into clusters of connotations. As the scientific use of language aims at truth, it will always raise the question of truth or falsehood. But the emotive use, on the contrary, cannot be subjected to scientific verification, since scientific criteria are irrelevant here. As Sidney said long ago, the charge of falsehood cannot be levelled against poets, since they do not affirm any truth.⁷

In fact, Richards says unequivocally that the question of veracity can be used as a criterion to decide whether a particular use of language is scientific or emotive:

The best test of whether our use of words is essentially symbolic i.e. scientific or emotive is the question – 'Is this true or false?' If this question is relevant, then the use is symbolic, if it is clearly irrelevant, then we have an emotive utterance.⁸

The scientific and emotive uses of words are meant for expressing different areas of human activities: those activities which aim at truth can be stated only through the symbolic use of language, whereas those that aim at feeling or attitude can be expressed through the emotive use.⁹

If in the scientific use references are left intact, in the emotive use

they are distorted. It is because of the distortion that language undergoes in the emotive use that Richards calls poetic statement 'pseudo-statement'. But a pseudo-statement must not be mistaken for a false statement: 'it is merely a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose in hand'.¹⁰

Richards has said time and again that logic does not enter the world of poetry. Truth being the concern of the scientist, it is the scientific or symbolic use of language that aims at logic. In the world of poetry logic is distorted by such poetic devices as metaphor and rhythm. Pointing out the illogicality of poetic statements, Richards writes:

A poet may distort his statements, he may make statements which have logically nothing to do with the subject under treatment; he may, by metaphor and otherwise, present objects for thought which are logically quite irrelevant, he may perpetrate logical nonsense, be as trivial or as silly logically as it is possible to be.¹¹

As poetry does not aim at logic, the question of true or false is irrelevant in the poetic use of language. It is only the scientific use of words that raises and answers the questions of veracity.

As Richards had divided language into the scientific and the emotive, the question that naturally arises is where the scientific use ends and the emotive use begins. Richards is careful in using the term 'emotive' rather than 'poetic', because he knows that the emotive use is not confined to poetry alone, but extends to other forms of literature as well. But can the emotive use extend beyond literature to include disciplines like philosophy, psychology and politics? In a significant utterance in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* Richards writes:

That metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language can be shown by mere observation. We cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it. . . . Even in the rigid language of the settled sciences we do not eliminate or prevent it without great difficulty. In the semi-technicalized subjects, in aesthetics, politics, sociology, ethics, psychology, theory of language, and so on, our constant chief difficulty is to discover how we are using it and how our supposedly fixed words are shifting their senses. In philosophy, above all, we can take no step safely

without an unrelaxing awareness of the metaphors we, and our audience, may be employing; and though we may pretend to eschew them, we can attempt to do so only by detecting them.¹²

Richards has demonstrated convincingly how metaphor is omnipresent in language. When we talk of the legs of the table, or call some one a pig, or discuss something in the light of something, we are using metaphors wittingly or unwittingly. Hence Richards's conclusion that 'most sentences in free or fluid discourse turn out to be metaphoric. Literal language is rare outside the central parts of the sciences.'¹³

If metaphor is omnipresent in language, and metaphor is the chief poetic device which distorts the referentiality of language, then language in general, not merely the language of literature, will give us pseudo-statements. This is the logical conclusion of Richards's view of language. And if this conclusion is accepted, then not only literature but also philosophy, psychology, sociology, politics and so on cannot be subjected to verification, since they do not aim at truth. And, again, disciplines like philosophy, psychology and so on can be grouped with literature, as they are all written in the rhetorical mode. When we discuss Derrida's view of language in the next section, we shall find that his conclusion is strikingly similar to the one we have derived from Richards's reflections on language. The difference between Derrida and Richards is that the former makes explicit what is only implied in the latter.

II

Derrida's view of language can be understood only against the backdrop of Saussure's structuralist linguistics. In his *Course in General Linguistics* published posthumously in 1916 Saussure made a complete break with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century linguistics which studied language in the historical context. Saussure has called this the diachronic study as against the synchronic study that takes language as it exists at a particular time and focuses on its structure.

Studying the structure of language, Saussure comes to the conclusion that linguistic signs are arbitrary. This is evident from

the fact that signs keep changing and that in different languages different signs are used for the same object. That linguistic signs are arbitrary had been said before Saussure by thinkers like Aristotle and Coleridge. Coleridge, for example, says that 'the sound sun, or the figures s, u, n are purely arbitrary modes of recalling the object'.¹⁴ Where Saussure differs from all the previous thinkers is in challenging the referentiality of language. He is of the opinion that linguistic signs do not refer to external objects but to each other and therefore language is not referential but self-referential.

Each linguistic unit, sign or sound, consists of a signifier and a signified which are not two things but two aspects of the same thing, like the obverse and the reverse of a coin. The signifier is the sign or the sound that we produce and the signified the concept. Of the relation between the two, Saussure writes: 'The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.'¹⁵ Linguistic units generate meaning not through their reference to objects in the external world but through their reference to and difference from each other. As Saussure says, 'concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relation with other terms of the system'.¹⁶ The unit *table*, for example, gets its concept not because it refers to an object but because of its difference from the other units such as *chair*, *house*, *label*, *level*, *cable*, *broken*, *cat*, *sat* and so on. This view of language implies that in each linguistic unit present there are traces of the units that are absent.

Derrida acquiesces in the basic tenets of Saussure, but he also reinterprets them in order to evolve his own concept of deconstruction in language. He accepts Saussure's view that language is self-referential and that meaning is engendered by the differences between linguistic units. He also agrees with Saussure that in each sign present there are traces of the signs absent. As Derrida says in one of his interviews:

Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' – phoneme or morpheme – being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system.¹⁷

Where Derrida differs from Saussure is in his concept of erasure.

The traces of the absent signs present constitute what Derrida calls erasure: what is said is erased by the traces.

Another term of Saussure's that Derrida reinterprets is 'difference'. As we have seen above, to Saussure linguistic units convey their meaning through difference. Saussure's 'difference' Derrida has replaced with his 'différance' used to suggest both what Saussure means by 'difference' and the French sense of 'deferment'. Thus Derrida differs from Saussure in his emphasis on deferment which implies that the present is constantly postponed and the ultimate never gets said. This deferment, again, stems from difference. The very nature of language, which conveys meaning through differences between linguistic signs and where the sign present is marked by the traces of the signs absent, precludes the possibility of saying anything with finality.

The above view of language implies what Derrida has called freeplay. Freeplay is a term that Derrida has employed to suggest that writing is only a play of differences without any centre. In his essay on 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' Derrida elaborates on the term 'freeplay':

Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. *Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence* [my italics].¹⁸

As is evident from the opening sentence, freeplay is contrasted with the ontotheological notion of presence. By accentuating 'the disruption of presence' Derrida undermines the long tradition of Western metaphysics going back to Plato and Aristotle that privileges speech over writing. And speech presumes that the speaker has present in his mind the idea that he wants to communicate. By valorising writing Derrida suggests that the nature of language makes any kind of presence impossible, as the absences, that is the traces of the absent signs, keep disrupting it. What one finds in the writing is 'the interplay of absence and presence' which is the freeplay of differences.

Derrida does not distinguish between literature and other disciplines like psychology, philosophy, politics, linguistics and so on. They are all grouped together under the rubric of 'human sciences'. Like Nietzsche before him, Derrida views philosophy in the rhetorical mode. As metaphors, metonymies and other figural

devices are all-pervasive in language, truth or the conveyance of truth is impossible: all that can be expressed is the illusion of truth which is characteristic of the rhetorical mode. Nietzsche had said: 'What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: . . . truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.'¹⁹ Like Nietzsche, Derrida finds metaphor the chief rhetorical device in philosophy and other human sciences and has written extensively on the subject in 'White Mythology'. Refuting the Platonic distinction between philosophy and rhetoric, Derrida argues that philosophical concepts have what he calls 'metaphorical sedimentation' or 'methaphorical credentials'. Since the 'metaphorical content' is not so palpable in the text of philosophy, Derrida calls it 'white mythology', borrowing the term from Anatole France. Explaining what 'white mythology' is, Derrida writes: 'It is metaphysics which has effaced in itself that fabulous scene (including figure, myth, fable, and allegory) which brought it into being, and which yet remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest.'²⁰ Though the metaphor in a philosophical text is written in white, not black ink, 'metaphor remains in all its essential features a classical element of philosophy'.²¹ By shifting the emphasis in philosophy from logic to rhetoric, Derrida has dissolved the distinction between philosophy in the wider sense, including the philosophy of language, and literature. Consequently philosophy, like literature, cannot lay claim to truth.

Because of the freeplay of differences and the use of tropes, writing is always marked by deconstruction. Deconstruction implies that the writer deconstructs whatever he constructs, or unbuilds whatever he builds. As Derrida denies that there is any centre or core of a text, there is nothing positive in it to control the meaning.

We can take an example from Derrida to demonstrate how deconstruction operates in writing. Derrida has attempted a deconstructive reading of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. We have seen above how Derrida makes use of and goes beyond Saussure's structuralist linguistics. Saussure has posited the supremacy of speech over writing of which Derrida gives several examples from the *Course*. At one place Saussure writes that 'language does have an oral tradition that is independent of writing',²² and at another that 'the linguistic object is not defined by the combination of the written word and the spoken word: the

spoken word alone constitutes the object'.²³ Derrida demonstrates that this valorisation of speech is deconstructed by Saussure's own arguments elsewhere in the book. He gives a significant quotation from the *Course* where Saussure admits that speech and writing are identical. To illustrate the differential nature of speech, Saussure falls back upon writing:

Since an identical state of affairs is observable in writing, another systems of signs, we shall use writing to draw some comparisons that will clarify the whole issue.²⁴

It is in writing that the differential nature of language is best illustrated. Derrida gives another example from the *Course* where writing is valorised. 'But the spoken word', writes Saussure, 'is so intimately bound to its written *image* that the latter manages to usurp the main role.'²⁵ Thus Saussure's valorisation of speech is deconstructed by his valorisation of writing. What happens in Saussure's *Course* is not an exception but the rule. Deconstruction is the common feature of all texts, as it is the inevitable outcome of the nature of language.

III

Though it can be safely argued that I. A. Richards anticipates Derrida, it would be wrong to presume that there is no difference between them. A major difference between Richards and Derrida is that the former accepts the referentiality of language, while the latter rejects it and acquiesces in Saussure's view of the self-referentiality of language. But more striking than the difference is the parallelism between the two.

Richards anticipates Derrida in his view of the figural language. On a superficial reading one may get the impression that Richards draws a watertight division between literature and other disciplines, but on a closer inspection one will find that his view of language does not warrant any such division, nor does it warrant a division between literature and critical commentary. If the language of what Richards calls semi-technicalised subjects (philosophy, psychology, politics and so on) is figural like that of literature, then they can all be grouped together, as they are all making pseudo-statements to which the criterion of truth does not apply.

This is the conclusion that Derrida arrives at, though under the influence of Nietzsche and Saussure.

Derrida talks about the interplay of presence and absence in language generating the freeplay of differences. Richards speaks of the interinanimation of words which includes the influence of the absent words on the word present. I am far from suggesting that Richards's interinanimation of words and Derrida's freeplay are identical. Freeplay is always the interplay of absence and presence, while interinanimation can also take place among the words that are only present. Moreover, in Derrida's freeplay, traces of the absent signs not merely influence the present sign but erase it. However, one can use Derrida's trace to describe the influence of the absent words on the words present in Richards's interinanimation of words.

Like Richards, the New Critics also distinguish between the two uses of language, but instead of calling them scientific and emotive, they designate them scientific and poetic. To them the emotive use of language is confined to poetry. Throughout their critical programme the New Critics set off against each other science and poetry and the two uses of language that they make. Words have two different properties which have been denominated denotation and connotation. Denotation is the literal meaning that words have in the dictionary: connotation is the suggestive meaning that words are charged with in the poetical context. Of the two uses of language, Cleanth Brooks writes:

The tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other and thus violating their dictionary meanings.²⁶

Brooks's view of the language of poetry reminds one of Richards's interinanimation of words. In science, words are like bricks or parts of a machine whose nature and function will not change whatever other bricks or parts they are placed with. But in poetry words violate their literal meaning through interaction upon each other. The difference between Richards and Brooks is that the former includes in his interinanimation words which are absent, whereas Brooks confines this only to the words actually present in poetry. Moreover Brooks would find untenable Richards's view that interinanimation takes place outside poetry as well.

Like Brooks, Ransom contrasts science with poetry on several counts. Science deals with ideas, poetry with images; science with universals, poetry with particulars. Ransom also distinguishes between the logical meaning which is peculiar to science and the local meaning that one discerns in poetry. Contrasting science with art, Ransom writes in his celebrated essay 'Poetry: a Note in Ontology':

Science gratifies a rational or practical impulse and exhibits the minimum of perception. Art gratifies a perceptual impulse and exhibits the minimum of reason.²⁷

To achieve their respective goals, science and poetry employ language differently. A scientific discourse 'has no intention of employing figurative language'.²⁸ Art or poetry, on the contrary, cannot dispense with figures of speech which 'twist accident away from the straight discourse, as if to intimate astonishing lapses of rationality beneath the smooth surface of discourse'.²⁹ What Ransom is driving at is very similar to Brooks's division of meaning into denotation and connotation. Science aims at logical meaning and as such shuns metaphors which distort it.

Following the semanticist Charles W. Morris, Ransom distinguishes between sign and icon, saying that the sign refers to an object but the icon resembles or imitates an object. Science makes use of signs, while art employs icons:

symbols are algebraic characters or words used technically, as defined in the dictionary, or defined for the purpose of a given discourse in the discourse itself. But the aesthetic signs are 'icons' or images. As signs they have semantical objects, or refer to objects, but as iconic signs they also resemble or imitate these objects.³⁰

If Ransom resembles Brooks in maintaining that in science words have their dictionary meaning, he also differs from Brooks when he says that it is 'icon' used as a synonym for image, and not paradox, that distinguishes science from art or poetry.

As has already been observed, to Richards logic does not enter poetry, and therefore the world of poetry and the world of science are two distinct worlds with nothing in common. If science makes statements, poetry makes pseudo-statements. The difference be-

tween the language of science and that of poetry is the difference in kind, not in degree. This watertight division between science and poetry and the two uses of language that they make is untenable to Ransom. He inveighs against Richards's belief that poetry makes pseudo-statements. Taking issue with Richards at several places, Ransom says repeatedly that poetry gives knowledge, though this knowledge is different from the knowledge of science. In his essay on Richards, 'A Psychologist Looks at Poetry', Ransom states that 'imagination is an organ of knowledge whose technique is images'.³¹ This flies in the face of Richards's pseudo-statement. If poetry is knowledge, then its statements cannot be pseudo-statements. Ransom says that poetry gives us the knowledge of particulars as against science which gives us the knowledge of universals. Poetry 'presents to the reflective mind the particularity of nature, whereas there is quite another organ, working by a technique of universals, which gives us science'.³² Though opposed to each other, poetry and science have this in common: that both aim at knowledge. If science gives us the knowledge of 'a man', poetry gives us the knowledge of 'this particular man'.

As literature gives knowledge, it cannot leave out completely, even if it is possible, the symbolic use of words in science. Ransom says time and again that part of the logic of science enters the world of poetry, as words in poetry do not completely shed their symbolic or literal meaning. The following quotations from Ransom's 'Wanted: An Ontological Critic' will make his position clear:

art makes a syntax out of its peculiar mixture of pure symbols and liberal iconic signs.³³

Science deals exclusively in pure symbols but art deals essentially, though not exclusively, in iconic signs.³⁴

it [the logic of art] will have no validity at all unless it holds itself in part by scientific symbols.³⁵

Evidently, Ransom does not shut off logic from poetry.

As against the conventional view that the poem consists of two elements, whether they are called form and content or metre and meaning, Ransom argues that there are four elements in a poem. These are the structure and texture of meaning and the structure and texture of sound-pattern or metre. In a poem there is the

logical meaning or structure and the illogical meaning or texture. Similarly there are present in a poem the logical sound-pattern or structure and the illogical sound-pattern or texture. The structure of meaning and the structure of the sound-pattern is what the poet starts with, but in a poem they combine with the texture of meaning and of metre. The texture stems from the interaction of meaning and metre. In a poem the meaning has to change in order to accommodate itself to the metrical pattern, just as metre also has to undergo changes to adjust itself to the meaning:

As the resonant metre un-determines the meaning and introduces IM [indeterminate meaning] so in turn the likely meaning un-determines the metre and introduces the variations of IS [indeterminate sound-structure].³⁶

We can now take stock of the parallelism between Richards and Ransom. Ransom accepts Richards's view that words refer to objects. He also believes, like Richards, that imagery (metaphor) and rhythm (metre) distort the scientific logic to engender that complexity which characterises poetry. But he does not lend credence to Richards's view that metaphor is omnipresent in language, or that poetic statement is logical nonsense.

Belonging to the same critical movement, both Ransom and Brooks focus on the language of poetry, but there are important differences between them which should not be overlooked. As a matter of fact, the theoretical position of Brooks is at places very similar to Ransom's; for example, when he stresses that the language of poetry sets off denotation and connotation against each other: 'It is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations.'³⁷ From this it follows that logic enters the world of poetry, but in the poetical context it is so coloured and complicated by metaphor- and rhythm-generating connotations that it cannot be clearly stated.

Brooks's concept of poetry, like Richards's, bears some striking resemblance to that of the deconstructionists. Brooks believes that in a poem the statement is always undercut by a counter-statement. If Richards believes that poetry is a pseudo-statement, it is because words in poetry are deprived of their literal meaning and as such function like notes in music. Brooks does not hold that words in poetry completely shed their literal meaning, but the connotations that they are charged with in the poetical context engender a tension between denotation and connotation. Conse-

quently whatever words in a poem denote is countered by what they connote. Apropos of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* Brooks writes:

Keats' urn must express a life which is above life and its vicissitudes, but it must also bear witness to the fact that its life is not life at all but is a kind of death. To put it in other terms, the urn must, in its role as historian, assert that myth is truer than history.³⁸

And of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* he says: 'Does the poet assert that Belinda is a goddess? Or does he say that she is a brainless chit?'³⁹ From these examples it is clear that in poetry there is no statement which is valid in the scientific sense. In a poem Belinda can be at once a 'goddess' and a 'brainless chit'. This kind of juxtaposition of the opposites is not possible in a scientific statement. Does the simultaneous presence of opposites in a poem imply that it does not say anything? If opposites cancel each other out, then the poem will be open to the charge of nihilism. This is the position of the deconstructionists. But the New Critics are of the opinion that opposites resolve into a higher unity. 'The characteristic unity of a poem', writes Brooks, 'lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total or governing attitude.'⁴⁰ And, again, 'it is "proved" as a dramatic conclusion is proved by its ability to resolve the conflicts which have been accepted as the *données* of the drama'.⁴¹

As opposites are reconciled into a higher unity, Brooks and the other New Critics believe that the poem has a core, though it is difficult to paraphrase it. It is on this count that the New Critics differ importantly from the deconstructionists. Deconstruction refutes the very notion that the poem has spatial structure with a fixed point at the centre. It views poetic structure as temporal,⁴² resulting in the freeplay of signifiers. To the New Critics the core of the poem will be that higher unity into which the opposites are reconciled.

IV

As Richards anticipates in some important ways Derrida's attitude towards language and literature, there are striking parallels between Richards and the New Critics on the one hand and Derrida

and the deconstructionists on the other. In fact, Richards is closer to deconstruction than his acolytes, the New Critics. And of all the deconstructionists it is Paul de Man, the proto-deconstructionist, who resembles Richards most. Compare Richards's remark above that metaphor is omnipresent in language and as such discernible alike in literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology and theory of language, with de Man's pronouncement that 'literature is everywhere; what they call anthropology, linguistics, psycho-analysis is nothing but literature'.⁴³ And, again, he reminds one of Richards's pseudo-statement in his remark that rhetoric of figural language, which is the chief characteristic of literature, suspends logic:

although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical figural potentiality of language with literature itself. . . . Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration.⁴⁴

That 'rhetoric radically suspends logic' reminds one of Richards's pseudo-statement which is logical nonsense. Like de Man, Richards also emphasises the fact that a pseudo-statement is the outcome of rhetorical devices, chiefly metaphor. De Man studies metaphors in philosophy to underline its resemblance to literature. Studying metaphors in Locke and Kant, he comes to the conclusion that 'the terminology of philosophers is full of metaphors'.⁴⁵ As metaphor is the chief characteristic of literariness, to the extent philosophy is metaphorical, it becomes literature. Hence de Man's assertion that 'all philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent upon figuration, to be literary'.⁴⁶

By suspending logic, a rhetorical work becomes what de Man calls a 'deconstructive discourse'. Deconstruction, de Man argues, is not something superimposed on literature by the critic, but goes into the very making of literature.⁴⁷ Thus deconstruction, like figuration, becomes an essential feature of literariness. However, de Man admits that the different forms of literary discourse differ from each other in degree, though not in kind, and that 'poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction'.⁴⁸ It is in poetry that language functions most significantly and therefore it is to poetry that the New Critics and the deconstructionists have mostly applied their critical tools.

In the case of Richards, it is difficult to say whether referentiality

or figurality is primary. If metaphor is omnipresent in language, and language is also referential, then the two uses of language co-exist. But Richards also gives the impression that the referential meaning is primary, while the rhetorical meaning is secondary. This is evident from the fact that while enumerating the four types of meaning, sense which is referential meaning comes first and next comes feeling or the rhetorical meaning. Richards's disciples, the New Critics, state unequivocally that denotation is primary and connotation secondary. But in a poem denotation and connotation are so mixed up that it is not possible to say where one ends and the other begins.

Unlike Richards and the New Critics, de Man believes that the primary and essential nature of language is figural. He acquiesces in Nietzsche's belief that 'no such thing as an unrhetorical natural language exists that could be used as a point of reference'⁴⁹ and then makes the following generalisation:

the straightforward affirmation that the paradigmatic structure of language is rhetorical rather than representational or expressive of a referential, proper, meaning . . . marks a full reversal of the established priorities which traditionally root the authority of the language in its adequation to an extralinguistic referent or meaning, rather than in the intralinguistic resources of figures.⁵⁰

This reversal of the conventional order of the two kinds of meaning is the outcome of the deconstructive reading. Contrary to the critics of the past, including the New Critics, de Man holds that in language referentiality is aberrant, while figurality is radical. It is the figurality that forms the base of the language and referentiality is only a deviation from it.⁵¹

De Man does not gainsay the referentiality of language but reckons it secondary. Thus his position is the converse of that of Richards and the New Critics who look upon language as primarily referential and tropes and figures of speech as deviations. The extreme Derridean position will deny that language has any referential property, but de Man does not take such a stance. He believes that language has two distinct properties, literal and figural, which he designates as signification and symbolisation. The very existence of figural language presupposes the existence of non-figural language from which it can be distinguished and with which it can be contrasted. To deny the referentiality of language is

to deny its rhetoricity. De Man writes:

The situation implies that figural discourse is always understood in contradistinction to a form of discourse that would not be figural; it postulates, in other words, the possibility of referential meaning as the *telos* of all languages.⁵²

But in a text it is difficult to separate the figural from the literal. All that can be said is that both are simultaneously present, undercutting each other. The figural and the literal meanings conflict with each other without either of them becoming predominant.

Like de Man, Miller also believes that language is originally figural and 'words are metaphors'. In his review of Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* he makes the following generalisation which reminds one of de Man:

Rather than figures of speech being derived or 'translated' from proper use of language, all language is figurative at the beginning. The notion of a literal or referential use of language is only an illusion born of the forgetting of the metaphorical 'roots' of language.⁵³

Using Richards's terms one can say that Miller denies the possibility of the scientific use of language which is bereft of figuration. On the other hand, Miller also suggests that referentiality is never completely absent from language. In his review of Joseph Riddel's *The Inverted Bell*, Miller contrasts referentiality with deconstruction:

It [text] says something which is capable of being interpreted in two irreconcilable ways. It is 'undecidable'. One way is referential (there is an origin) and the other deconstruction of this referentiality (there is no origin, only the freeplay of linguistic substitution).⁵⁴

The very fact that deconstruction is the deconstruction of referential meaning implies that referentiality is present in language. Miller reiterates this notion when he talks about the act of reading. 'The act of reading', he says, 'undermines its own status as "act", since it is unable to efface wholly the referentiality of the text in question and also unable to return in peace to a naive mimetic interpretation.'⁵⁵ This implies a medial position which combines

referentiality with rhetoric. But the two are not only simultaneously present but also incompatible making it difficult for the reader to decide which of the two is plausible. This reminds one of de Man's view that in the rhetorical mode literal and figural meanings not only co-exist but are incompatible making it 'impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings . . . prevails'.⁵⁶

Both de Man and Miller are of the view that the literal and figural meanings co-exist in a diametrical opposition making it impossible for any truth or meaning to be conveyed. Derrida denies that language has any referential property. Is there any difference between Derrida and his American acolytes?

The word 'referentiality' will give us the clue to the difference between Derrida and the Derrideans. Derrida has adopted the Saussurean attitude towards language that words are not referential but self-referential, as they do not refer to external objects but to each other. Derrida reinterprets Saussure to establish that language is a freeplay of signifiers without a centre and as such incapable of conveying truth. This view is bolstered up by the Nietzschean attitude towards language. Nietzsche believes that 'language is rhetoric' and that 'tropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will: they are its truest nature'.⁵⁷ This view of language denounces referentiality not in the sense in which Derrida takes it but in the sense of literal meaning.

What the American deconstructionists have done is to combine Nietzsche with Derrida. They adopt the Nietzschean attitude that language is originarily and essentially figural and combine with it the Derridean concept of deconstruction. Where the American deconstructionists differ from Derrida as well as Nietzsche is in positing the interplay of literal and figural meanings. And, interestingly enough, this is precisely the difference also between Richards and the New Critics. Unlike Richards, the New Critics believe that denotation and connotation are set off against each other in a literary construct. Thus the deconstructionists and the New Critics come very close to each other. But whereas the New Critics confine this interplay of the two meanings to literary texts, the deconstructionists find it present in the very nature of language.

An important difference between the New Critics and the deconstructionists is that the former believe the text has a core, a centre which resolves antinomies, while the latter believe in freeplay, the

decentring of the text. To the New Critics, opposites that are simultaneously present in the text do not cancel each other out but resolve into a higher unity. Like many other critical ideas of the New Critics, this can be traced back to Coleridge who postulated the superiority of symbol over allegory by saying that in symbol antinomies are resolved, while allegory presumes no such resolution. 'The advantage', writes Coleridge, 'of symbolic writing over allegory is that it presumes no disjunction of faculties, but simple predominance.'⁵⁸ As the deconstructionists believe that in a text opposites remain opposed to each other instead of being reconciled and resolved into a higher unity, they prefer allegory to symbol. Hence the title of de Man's book, *Allegories of Reading*.

In his preface to the manifesto of the Yale critics, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Geoffery Hartman says of deconstruction that

deconstruction . . . refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art.⁵⁹

This is where the New Critics and the deconstructionists part company. The New Critic identifies the force of literature with the meaning embodied through imagery, rhythm and other poetic devices, the meaning that resolves antinomies and is like soul in the human body or sap in the plant that passes through all its parts. The deconstructionists run counter to the New Critics in their belief that literature is only a freeplay of signifiers without a centre. Far from presenting any meaning, words carry with them 'a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning'.⁶⁰ If the New Critics posit the presence of meaning, the deconstructionists posit its absence. That is why the deconstructionists talk of the demystification of literature which implies that literature has no mystery, no incarnation of meaning which the critic may unravel.

The deconstructionists have made a twofold division of criticism into what they have called 'metaphysical' and deconstructive. The 'metaphysical criticism' presumes that the text has a fixed meaning which the critic is supposed to focus on, whereas the deconstructive criticism believes in the indeterminacy of meaning. Of the methods used in the deconstructive criticism, J. Hillis Miller writes that it 'includes those methods which hypothesize that in literature, for reasons which are intrinsic to language itself, meta-

physical presuppositions are, necessarily, both affirmed and subverted'.⁶¹ What Miller is driving at is not different from what Hartman has said above. The affirmation and subversion of metaphysical presuppositions at one and the same time is deconstruction. Metaphysical presuppositions are basically the assumption of the presence of meaning, and deconstruction subverts this assumption by positing the differential property of language. Hence Miller's remark that 'a critic must choose either the tradition of presence or the tradition of "difference"'.⁶²

Deconstruction presumes that the writer at once affirms and 'unfirms', says and 'unsays' his meaning. Using the Hegelian terms one can say that in the New Criticism thesis and antithesis result in a synthesis, whereas deconstruction rules out the possibility of a synthesis. As the meaning is deconstructed, is both 'affirmed' and 'subverted', the ultimate result is what we can call nihilism. Defining the function of deconstruction, Hillis Miller writes:

The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.⁶³

So the function of deconstruction is not to deconstruct a text but to demonstrate how the text has deconstructed itself. But how does one draw a line between the critic deconstructing the text and the text deconstructing itself? The way the deconstructionist emphasises that every text deconstructs itself certainly points to the critic's preoccupation with deconstruction rather than the text's. One can safely argue that deconstruction is 'a dismantling of the structure of a text'. However, Miller is right when he says that deconstruction 'annihilates the ground on which the building stands'.

We can now take an example to see how deconstruction operates in practice. In his deconstructive reading of the American New Critics, de Man points to the discrepancy between organic unity and intentional structure in their criticism as well as in Coleridge who was a major influence on them. Apropos of Coleridge, de Man states that on the one hand Coleridge sets great store by organic unity, and on the other he emphasises the role of the

conscious will which undercuts organic unity. Coleridge argues with considerable emphasis that Shakespeare 'never wrote anything without design' which goes contrary to the idea of organic unity such as that of a plant which has no 'design'. Extending his deconstructive reading to the New Critics, de Man writes:

The ambivalence reappears among modern disciples of Coleridge, in a curious discrepancy between their theoretical assumptions and their practical results. As it refines its interpretations more and more, American criticism does not discover a single meaning but a plurality of significations that can be radically opposed to each other. Instead of revealing a continuity affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity. Almost in spite of itself, it pushes the interpretative process so far that the analogy between the organic world and the language of poetry finally explodes. This unitarian criticism finally becomes a criticism of ambiguity, an ironic reflection on the absence of the unity it had postulated.⁶⁴

De Man's argument is that organic unity does not permit of ambiguity and irony based on opposed meanings so much emphasised by the New Critics. Ambiguity and irony characterise an intentional structure such as a chair and not an organism like a plant. Thus the New Critical formulas deconstruct organic unity – which is a favourite term of the New Critics.⁶⁵ De Man also refers to the attack on the writer's intention by the New Critics, especially by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their essay called 'The Intentional Fallacy'. But, as is evident from the above citation, the attack on the writer's intention is deconstructed by the stress placed on ambiguity and irony which mark only an intentional configuration which a work of literature is. It is also presumed that someone writing on de Man on the New Critics will find a similar deconstruction at work in his essay. This series of deconstructions is suggested by the term *différance* which implies that the ultimate meaning is constantly deferred.

The deconstructionists, unlike the New Critics, make use of the implied intention of the writer. De Man has distinguished between the intention in the mind of the writer and that realised in the structure of the work and argues that it is the latter rather than the former which is significant for the literary critic. 'The structural

intentionality', writes de Man, 'determines the relationship between the components of the resulting object in all its parts, but the relationship of the particular state of mind of the person engaged in the act of structurization to the structured object is altogether contingent.'⁶⁶ This is very close to the position of the Chicago Critics,⁶⁷ but de Man and other deconstructionists go beyond them in assuming that in a work of art there is the obvious intention that is deconstructed by the subterranean intention. Thus there is the simultaneous presence in a literary work of two different intentions which are diametrically opposed to each other.

If the New Critics and the deconstructionists differ from each other on the writer's intention, they also differ on the kind of literature they idealise and focus on. The deconstructionists' focus on English romanticism seems calculated to counter the emphasis on metaphysical and modernist poetry in the New Criticism. The New Critics have postulated at a number of places that literature gives knowledge,⁶⁸ though it is not scientific knowledge, and metaphysical poetry with its seemingly logical structure stands this criterion better than romantic poetry. The deconstructionists, on the contrary, believe that no truth, no knowledge of any sort, can be conveyed by literature which is only a freeplay of signifiers, and hence they idealise romantic poetry which with its excess of emotion and dearth, if not absence, of logical content gives the impression of being just the kind of literature which has nothing to do with truth or knowledge.

Even though we cannot draw the line between the language of literature and the language of what is not literature, whether we designate it science, pure science or something else, we all feel the difference. We can point out the difference between the two uses of language by employing the Saussrean terms *langue* and *parole*. There is a *langue* of ordinary as well as of literary language which we can all imagine but not locate in the actual use of language, which is *parole*. It is in literary language that deconstruction operates at its best, even though it is difficult to believe that literature is nihilistic. But outside literature, wherever we set the boundary, deconstruction is minimal and hence negligible. Moreover we must not forget that figuration is only one of the features of literature. There are other features like metre, rhyme, rhythm, dissonance, consonance and so on which are just as important as figuration. Even figuration is discernible more often in literature than in extraliterary disciplines like philosophy and psychology.

Besides, metaphors in the text of philosophy are mostly dead metaphors, while in literature one comes across living metaphors invented by the writer. Hence the New Critical position which distinguishes between literature and other disciplines is more sane and sensible than that of the deconstructionists. No wonder the American deconstructionists have in large measure confined themselves to literature which implies that they find deconstruction in its true form only in literary works. This lends credence, indirectly though, to the New Critics' belief in the separate entity of literature.

Notes

1. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York, 1965) p. 32.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 47ff.
4. *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1956) pp. 9–10.
5. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 63.
6. *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 149.
7. '... the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth', in *An Apology for Poetry in English Critical Texts*, ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera (Delhi, 1975) p. 31.
8. *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 150.
9. See *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1925) pp. 267–8.
10. *Poetries and Sciences* (New York, 1970) p. 60.
11. *Practical Criticism* (New York, 1929) pp. 180–1.
12. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 92.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
14. *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and other English Poets*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1908) p. 216.
15. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1966) p. 67. Saussure's argument that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary has been refuted by Émile Benveniste in his *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, Fl., 1970). 'Between the signifier and the signified', writes Benveniste, 'the link is not arbitrary, it is necessary.' Quoted by Geoffrey Strickland in *Structuralism or Criticism?* (Cambridge, 1981) p. 16.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
17. *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, Ill., 1981) p. 26.
18. *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, Md., 1979) pp. 263–4.
19. Quoted by Jacques Derrida in 'White Mythology', *New Literary History* (Autumn 1974) p. 15.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

22. Quoted by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976) p. 30.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 52.
25. Ibid., p. 36.
26. *The Well-Wrought Urn* (London, 1968) p. 6.
27. *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge, La., 1965) p. 130.
28. Ibid., pp. 132-3.
29. Ibid.
30. J. C. Ransom, *Beating the Bushes* (New York, 1972) p. 5.
31. *The World's Body*, p. 156.
32. Ibid.
33. *Beating the Bushes*, p. 7.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 11.
36. Ibid., p. 31.
37. *The Well-Wrought Urn*, p. 5.
38. Ibid., pp. 173-4.
39. Ibid., p. 161.
40. Ibid., p. 168.
41. Ibid., p. 169.
42. See de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Interpretations: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, Md., 1969) pp. 203-4.
43. *Blindness and Insight* (New York, 1971) p. 18.
44. *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn., 1979) p. 10.
45. 'The Epistemology of Metaphor,' in *On Metaphor*, ed. Seldon Sacks (Chicago, Ill., 1980) p. 25.
46. Ibid., p. 28.
47. De Man writes: 'The deconstruction is not something we have added to the texts but it constituted the text in the first place' (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 17).
48. Ibid.
49. Quoted by de Man in *Allegories of Reading*, p. 105.
50. Ibid., p. 106.
51. 'It [referential meaning] becomes an aberrant trope that conceals the radical figurality of language behind the illusion that it can properly mean' (*Allegories of Reading*, p. 202).
52. Ibid., p. 201.
53. 'Tradition and Difference', *Diacritics*, II (Winter 1972) p. 11.
54. 'Deconstructing the Deconstructors', *Diacritics*, v (Summer 1975) p. 30.
55. Ibid.
56. *Allegories of Reading*, p. 10.
57. Quoted by de Man, *ibid.*, p. 105.
58. *Coleridge's Works: Miscellanies, Aesthetic and Literary*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1911) p. 107.
59. *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979) p. vii.
60. Ibid., p. viii.

61. 'On Edge: the Crossways of Contemporary Criticism', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (January 1979) pp. 18-19.
62. Quoted by Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York, 1983) p. 49.
63. 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', *Georgia Review* (Summer 1976) p. 341.
64. De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 28.
65. 'The act of Irony', writes de Man, 'reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality' ('The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 203).
66. *Blindness and Insight*, p. 25.
67. See R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto, 1953) pp. 166-7, and Wayne C. Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, Ill., 1973) pp. 3-20.
68. For Ransom's view of poetry as knowledge see above, p. 79. See also Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (eds), *Understanding Poetry* (New York, 1976) pp. 9-10.

4

Samuel Johnson among the Deconstructionists*

JEAN H. HAGSTRUM

Harold Bloom has called Samuel Johnson 'the greatest critic in the language', unexpectedly high praise that tempts me to wonder how – and indeed if – the precursor might have returned the ephebe's compliment. Such bold fancying leads on to heady ambition. Could it possibly enlighten or amuse us to extend the enquiry beyond Bloom to Geoffrey Hartman (like Bloom, 'barely a deconstructionist') and then to Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Hillis Miller, whom Hartman has called 'boa-deconstructors, merciless and consequent'? And also to their followers, associates and predecessors? I withdraw at once from one of the comparisons hinted at: I simply do not dare juxtapose Johnson and Derrida. If the only slight immodesties of Fielding and Sterne provoked such epithets as these – 'sad stuff', 'nothing odd will do long' – one recoils from contemplating what the following 'Derridadaisms' (Hartman again) would surely have evoked: 'the phallus is a "privileged signifier"' and 'it is difficult to separate writing from onanism'. And what new gesture or action might Johnson make or take to reassert the reality that exists off the printed page were he to encounter what has become virtually the epigraph of current literary speculation: *il n'y a pas de hors texte*?

Of course, any attempt to imagine what Johnson, his contemporaries or his predecessors could have said about our own seething and teeming hermeneutic culture might be totally aborted if we did the sensible thing and looked at his *Dictionary* of 1755 with the vocabulary of the 1980s in mind. The gulf does at first seem to be

*This essay is adapted from a lecture originally delivered at Stanford University on 13 December 1984 – the 200th anniversary of Johnson's death. On the same date it was also delivered, by tape recording, at the University of Delhi in India.

unbridgeable – between the Johnsonian then and the Derridean now. The word I just used, *hermeneutic*, does not appear. There is neither *deconstruction* nor *displacement* of any kind, neither *textuality* nor *intertextuality*; there is no *adequation*, no *logocentrism*, no *marginality*, no *undecidability*. *Hermetic* meant only ‘chymical’, and Johnson would not have permitted us to *reify* or *valorise*. If you *elided* something in Johnson’s England, you cut it in pieces; and the *Dictionary* is of no use in trying to understand the notion that ‘Heidegger’s Being . . . *elides* with Derrida’s pharmakon’. When you *inscribed*, you literally wrote on something or you marked something with letters, but you were given no sanction whatever for permitting ‘the play of difference [to] inscribe itself in the text’.¹

But just as I was about to close Johnson’s linguistic leaves and shut the door on this kind of enquiry, my eye fell on *precursor*, which Johnson defines as ‘forerunner; harbinger’ and illustrates with this teasingly (Harold) Bloomian sentence from Pope: ‘Thomas Burnet [son of the Bishop and a contemporary literary enemy of the poet] played the *precursor* to the coming of Homer in his [Burnet’s] *Homerides*.’ My mind leapt at once to *The Anxiety of Influence*, where we are told that for a startled moment it is possible to believe that a later poet has been imitated by his ancestor in a revisionary process known as *apophrades*, or the return of the dead. Needless to say, *apophrades* does not exist in Johnson; but *belated*, a more famous ‘Bloomism’, of course does. It is defined in a way that would not be displeasing, I think, to the author of *A Map of Misreading*, who displays the dark and bewildering agony of arriving too late on the literary scene. For Johnson, to be *belated* was literally to be ‘benighted’, as was Milton’s ‘belated’ peasant in *Paradise Lost*, who watched the midnight revels of faerie elves in a forest. Such mad or playful derangements of chronology as these I have introduced may tease us out of thought as doth eternity and should be indulged not one second longer than playfulness remains sane. And yet even so learned and sensible a scholar as Garry Wills, writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column for 13 April 1984, becomes synchronic when cold realism would have insisted that he be diachronic. He writes, ‘The best judgment on Richard M. Nixon’s appearance on “CBS News” is contained in this magnificent sentence.’ After quoting it in full – and no one could dispute its appropriateness as well as its magnificence – Wills says, ‘That sentence is by Samuel Johnson, but the subject is clearly Richard M. Nixon’, and he then reveals that he has been quoting *Rambler* Number 76.

Have I seemed to verge on parody? If so, I apologise for raising false hopes. That literary form is quite beyond my powers: I do not know how to tell the truth but tell it slant, as Emily Dickinson urges us to do. Besides, I am quite serious in inviting you to consider the possibility that the lover and frequent user of *sesquipedalia verba* would have been challenged to put to the test of hard thought the new and sometimes outlandish linguistic formulations we encounter daily. I also suggest that Johnson would have contemplated the present critical scene with an unquenchable fascination not unmixed with horror. It is altogether likely that the criticism of the 1980s would have evoked in him a rich and complex emotion not entirely unlike the post-Burkean, Romantic sublime, a concept which he himself used, though with reservations.

A considerable power of Harold Bloom's criticism is that it forces us to engage in battle with our predecessors, and it is a pity that so few contemporary critics have seen fit to wrestle with Johnson. It was not so earlier in this century. For T. S. Eliot, Johnson stood with Dryden and Coleridge as the greatest trio of critics in English; more than that, Eliot always felt Johnson to be a presence who at the very least had to be placed hierarchically. Lytton Strachey believed that Johnson's judgements were 'never right', yet he could not ignore them since they were always 'subtle, or solid, or bold'. And more than one New Critic, trying to rehabilitate Donne and the Metaphysicals, tested his strength against the author of the *Life of Cowley* and came out of the fray admiring the adversary he had paused to analyse in detail. Such confrontation seems not to take place now. When Johnson is quoted, he is quoted as an aphorist or a verbal miniaturist. Or he is seen swimming along in the current critical stream only occasionally distinguished from his fellows of the finny tribe. Thus Lentricchia says that Hirsch is 'epistemologically more lugubrious even than Samuel Johnson', whose criticism is regarded less as thought than self-revelation. But Johnson's criticism, it is conceded, is likely to interest us longer than that of Stanley Fish.

Even the categories that are sometimes imposed on the present welter do not seem to have a place for Johnson. Hillis Miller distinguishes canny from uncanny critics. The thought of the uncanny (Paul de Man, Derrida) leads to aporia, the alogical, the absurd, ultimately to impasse; and of course Johnson has no place there. But he does not seem to belong in the company of Socrates and the Socratics either, Miller's canny critics. These have an unshakeable faith that thought can follow the threads of logic into

the deepest abysses of being and come back with ordered meaning. To such meditations Johnson believed humanity to be unequal: ambitious cosmological systems, he said, are 'equally hidden from learning and from ignorance'.

We may now have come to the reason why most contemporary critics keep a respectful distance from a great predecessor. They fear the *kick* – the decisive action that establishes a reality outside mind, outside text, outside language itself. They would be uncomfortable moving from *écriture* and *parole*, from the text and the purely professional literary community, to life and society. It seems unlikely that they will soon desert the risky but glamorous enterprise of helping Western culture attain what Valéry regarded as its destiny – that is, achieving a 'rien infiniment riche'. It might indeed prove to be rather dull to stand with Johnson by the stream of actuality, watching 'with great diligence, the operations of human nature' and tracing 'the effects of opinion, humour, interest, and passion'. René Wellek – in his recent charge that deconstruction may yet destroy literary culture because it fails to value the transactions of mind with nature – does not seek the help of Johnson, perhaps because he still wishes to dissociate himself from what he may continue to regard as a crude mimetic literalism. And yet his conclusion is profoundly Johnsonian:

Denying the self and minimizing the perceptual life of man, the theory [of deconstruction] deliberately refuses to acknowledge that the relation of mind and world is more basic than language.

It would seem that a totally unnavigable sea separates Johnson from the likes of the late Paul de Man. How dare I suggest, then, that there are areas of temperamental sympathy and of philosophical coincidence between an author who marched under the banner of an assertive external nature and those who hoist the flag of mental and linguistic primacy and determinism? The reason, all too briefly put, is that Johnson was no more a mental than he was a moral snob; he was in fact capable of astonishing acts of intellectual as well as personal charity. Besides, I take considerable Boswellian pleasure in bringing him to dinner here with contemporary equivalents of Jack Wilkes, Malebranche, Descartes, Berkeley or even Hume. Needless to say, the parallels I draw will have to be loose, and I intend no comparative judgements of intellectual worth or achievement.

Johnson was of course far from being an agnostic, a sceptic, a rebel or a destroyer of convention. But the bent of his mind toward reducing, revising, displacing or altering mental structures too easily established cannot be overestimated. 'Every thing, which Hume has advanced against Christianity', he said, 'had passed through my mind long before he wrote.' And in our day, when indeterminacy and undecidability are exalted, it is well to note that Johnson respected the flux, complexity and psychological disruptiveness of language so much that he was sometimes uncomfortable even with definition, which he once said he regarded as outside 'the province of man':

The works and operations of nature are too great in their extent, or too much diffused in their relations, and the performances of art too inconstant and uncertain, to be reduced to any determinate idea. . . . Definitions have been no less difficult or uncertain in criticism than in law. Imagination . . . has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the inclosures of regularity.

Johnson, one feels sure, was constantly tempted to unravel the skein of his own and his culture's weaving. Up to a point, and within limits that I hardly need to define, he may be regarded as one of the most original and persistent deconstructionists in our language.

In two areas of thought the affinities of spirit between the older critic and our own contemporaries seem to me to be suggestive and noteworthy. One concerns the appropriate relation of criticism to creation, and the other concerns the language proper to 'critic learning'. In confronting each of these we experience that double motion of early negation and ultimate affirmation – a 'binary' movement of the mind, as current jargon would have it – that every student of Johnson has come to expect. Therefore, before we arrive at a sympathy we must confront a disparity of views. But we must resist the easy temptation to erect that disparity into a permanent hostility about the issue being discussed.

One striking feature of current critical thought is its tendency to take itself very seriously and to regard its concerns as culturally and politically influential. Thus Philip Rahv and Frank Kermode see a connection between modernist spatial aesthetics and fascism; presumably the exposure of such dangerous literary pictorialism

would have to be considered a major political rescue. Internally, within the domain of literature itself, criticism no longer desires to be considered an emergent class propelled upward by the assistance of affirmative action. It asks full equality and proclaims itself willing to submit itself to the analytical tests and evaluative judgments hitherto given only to great poetry and fiction. This thrust of upward mobility has led to dismay in both philosophical and creative circles. John R. Searle finds the current critical bounciness reduced to absurdity by the view that 'the prime creative task has now passed from the literary artist to the critic'. Saul Bellow thinks that deconstructing professors now control departments of English and philosophy. Even worse! Bellow continues:

In the name of 'deconstruction', [younger academics] have taken over . . . literature itself, operating in the cockpit side by side with Shakespeare, Milton, etc., as copilots. These academics – good God! Suppose that a dwarf sitting in Shakespeare's lap were to imagine that he was piloting the great Shakespearean jet!

In response to such claims, if indeed they have been made, and to such conquests, if indeed they have been won, Johnson would of course have emitted a long, withdrawing, deconstructing roar of his own.

Johnson regularly denigrated, or at least tended to downgrade, his own intellectual enterprises. A lexicographer, as we all know, is a 'harmless drudge'. Grammatical pedantry is an unhappily inescapable fate: 'No man forgets his original trade: the rights of nations, and of kings, sink into questions of grammar, if grammarians discuss them.' Scholars should be the satellites of their authors, realising that their concerns are usually 'of very small importance; they involve neither property nor liberty; nor favour the interest of sect or party'. Even adverse judgement does little 'real mischief. No genius was ever blasted by the breath of critics.'

But the more closely we examine such denigrations, the more keenly we sense that if they were not in fact insincere, they were often playful, sometimes uttered with the intention of disarming opponents or anticipating objections. In other words, Johnson, to use a favourite current term, was being proleptical. And we soon come to see that it was the steady and central aim of his learned prose to exalt learned commentary. As a learned commentator himself, he was sickened by cant about the dull duty of an editor,

and he boldly exalted conjectural criticism above even the most comprehensive mental powers. Although he sometimes, to be sure, used the word *genius* to mean only mental inclination, he often applied it in its most exalted sense ('a mind of large general powers') to the works of the learned as well as to imaginative creation. It was therefore just and fully Johnsonian that Boswell's uncle should apply to Johnson himself the word *genius* when he referred to the lexicographer's scholarly achievements, calling him 'a robust genius, born to grapple with whole libraries'. And in the famous critical sentences I now quote, Johnson refers primarily not to poetry at all but to scholarship: 'No man ever yet became great by imitation. Whatever hopes for the veneration of mankind must have invention in the design or the execution; either the effect must itself be new, or the means by which it is produced.'

The reason Johnson steadfastly refused to separate *belles* from other *lettres* is that he stood proudly in the venerable tradition that united them. He defined literature as 'learning' and learning as 'literature'. He would surely have embraced Geoffrey Hartman's opinion that 'criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figural strength'. It would have been easily conceivable to him that learning and criticism were entirely capable of producing a worthy copilot for Shakespeare. For the very greatest scholars and the very greatest critics are creators, uniting imagination with reason, knowledge of men and nature with knowledge of books – in the same way that the very greatest poets do. No artificial barriers separate the thinker from the poet. Mental energy can flow into and out of all genres, all forms, in prose and poetry alike, to and fro between the visual and the verbal, between the imaginative and the ratiocinative.

For this reason it is fully consistent of Johnson to prefer rashness to cowardice even in scholarship (for scholarship read also criticism, the essay, philosophy, the *causerie*): 'presumption will be easily corrected. Every experiment will teach caution. . . . It is the advantage of vehemence and activity, that they are always hastening to their own reformation.' He also censured timidity: 'there is . . . some danger lest timorous prudence should be inculcated, till courage and enterprize are wholly repressed'. We pinch ourselves. Is Johnson talking to teachers, scholars and moralists and not to poets? He is. And his call for imaginative alacrity in science, natural and otherwise – for vehemence, activity, courage and

enterprise – is itself a creative challenge to learned and expository utterance, for he condenses his ideas (as, say, a great playwright might) into memorable proverb and brilliant trope:

It may be laid down as an axiom, that it is more easy to take away superfluities than to supply defects. . . . We know that a few strokes of the axe will lop a cedar; but what arts of cultivation can elevate a shrub?

If the example of Johnson is allowed to be instructive, we will of course not rush mindlessly to the judgement and analysis of all that pours from our learned presses. But we will have faith in the ideal that critical scholarship at its best can in its own way rival any other form of expression and thought. And we must surely applaud Geoffrey Hartman for saying that criticism has had a 'colorful past', that that past ought to be exemplary, that the attempt to fuse creation and criticism is a worthy modern enterprise necessary to success in both science and the arts, that an essay can be 'an intellectual poem' which requires rigorous analysis, and that criticism should be conceived 'as within literature, not outside of it looking in'.

The other area in which the critical art of Johnson can be assimilated to contemporary avant-garde criticism concerns vocabulary and style. The very suggestion of affinity here will arouse initial suspicion, perhaps dismay. Johnson, who boasted to Boswell that 'he had not taken upon him to add more than four or five words to the English language, of his own formation', frowned on the immodest coinage of new words or the use of old words in unestablished and fantastical senses. In our own day one extremely influential critic has minted or imported such imposing and unassimilable terms as these: *clinamen*, *tessera*, *askesis*, *daemonisation*, *gilgul*, *zimzum*. Johnson attacked in plain Anglo-Saxon English the habit of 'using big words for little matters', which Boswell translated into Latinate diction, deploring the 'practice of using words of disproportionate magnitude'. Johnson employed the following epithets to castigate even Shakespeare (how many of them could justly be applied to the vocabulary that today emanates from Paris or New Haven?): *harsh*, *ill-sorted*, *strained*, *strange*, *contrived*, *laboured*, *ludicrous*, *far-fetched* and *ineffective*, *forced* and *unnatural*, *fantastically perplexed*, *unendurable*. Were a modern Johnson inclined to personify a contemporary critic, he would have to swell

the Lilliputian Dick Minim to a Brobdingnagian – a Riccardus Maximus, say, a very large critic, great by walking on linguistic tiptoe, achieving a strutting dignity by an ever-enlarging sesquipedalianism. Some of us, retiring in total defeat from the verbal density of an article in *Clio* or *Glyph*, must have surely thought of Johnson's definition of 'terrifick' diction – 'a style by which the most evident truths are so obscured that they can no longer be perceived, and the most familiar propositions so disguised that they cannot be known'. Or of what he called the 'repulsive' style: 'its natural effect to drive away the reader'. Or at least of the 'bugbeat' manner: it 'has more terror than danger, and will appear less formidable, as it is more nearly approached'.

To stop here in our discussion of critical vocabulary and say 'there's and end on't' would be to do both Johnson and our contemporaries a grave injustice. Johnson's 'small' critics were just that – canting, superficial coxcombs, who disturbed the world by buzzing such omnibus tea-table words as 'Taste and Grace, Purity and Delicacy' or such foppish coffee-house simplicities as 'manly', 'dry', 'stiff' or 'flimzy'. No serious academic critic of today is brushed by that kind of frippery, for the best possess subtle minds full of philosophical, scientific, linguistic, historical and aesthetic data from many languages and many cultures. Johnson found it to be 'invariably true, that learning was never decried by any learned man'. If he derided 'terrifick' or 'bugbear' language, he was a friend to 'terms of art', to the language of science and education; and he did not gainsay the right of a learned discipline to create the words it needs: 'words are only hard to those who do not understand them', he said, 'and the critick ought always to enquire, whether he is incommoded by the fault of the writer, or by his own'.

Pedantry is of course a repellent weakness that can cause dismay and hostility, but Johnson defined it as 'the *unseasonable* ostentation of learning'. Learning in fit season he treated with respect, and he gladly admitted new professional and intellectual terms into both his *Dictionary* and his own vocabulary, often on the basis of only a single authority. He even boasted: 'I have much augmented the vocabulary of English.'

I earlier mentioned several contemporary critical terms that are not to be found in the great compendium of 1755. A revision in 1984 based on the Johnsonian principles I have just invoked would undoubtedly include them, even the uncouth and whimsical.

Johnson said about the policy governing his selection for the *Dictionary*: 'I have not rejected any [learned terms] by design, merely because they were unnecessary or exuberant' and the fellows and faculties of the School of Criticism and Theory should be informed that Johnson did include the following: *originary*, *prolepsis*, *paradigm*, *tropical* (from *trope*), *textuary*, *misprision*, *signifier* and the verb *to privilege*. There is no *ambivalence*, but *ambiguity* is amply defined and richly illustrated. *Narratology* does not exist, but *narrify* does. There is no *nililism*, but there is *nihility*. And the absence of *diachronic* is partly compensated by the presence of *synchronism* and the *synchronical*. Thus if we had only Johnson the lexicographer to guide us, our generation would not have to walk in total darkness, one reason being that both he and many moderns have drunk from the same wells of classical, religious, rhetorical, moral and critical learning.

If I have been right up to this point, a Samuel Johnson *redivivus* might conceivably have crushed some currently influential critics for having committed the shameful act of 'imposing words' (the 'daughters of earth') for ideas (clear mental images) or for things (the 'sons of heaven'); or he would have applauded the contemporary ambition to make criticism and scholarship imaginatively creative and mentally energetic, enthusiastically giving the enterprise a wide scope to invent and use fully and freely its own terms of art, many of which may ultimately enrich our store of useful intellectual weapons. In a talk that has been a tissue of might-be's and would-be's and of speculations necessarily somewhat fantastic, it may be permissible to imagine further, and finally, what category and what judgement an intellectually brilliant, learned and widely influential movement like the present one would have elicited in a powerful, analytical and judicial mind like Johnson's. He would, I believe, have created for the deconstructionists and their closest allies a category called 'metaphysical criticism'. The following sentences from the *Life of Cowley* about the deconstructionists' poetical ancestors in the seventeenth century possess, for me at least, an illuminating pertinence. The first of these sentences is applicable to living critics only in their worst moments, which (alas) exist and exist vividly and which therefore tend to vitiate one of their own central aims, namely to explore the visionary and the sublime in our tradition, the farthest reaches of human wit and intellectual aspiration in the Western world:

What they [the seventeenth-century metaphysicals] wanted . . . of the sublime, they endeavoured to supply by hyperbole; their amplifications had no limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them; and produced combination . . . that not only could not be credited, but could not be imagined.

The next sentence points to a tendency of the contemporary mind not often enough resisted, a tendency peculiarly characteristic of the new metaphysicals: 'Their attempts were always analytic; they broke every image into fragments.' The concessions I now quote are as fully deserved by our contemporaries as by their poetical forebears. The first, excessively harsh in its opening clause and in its last phrase, points to a delight in learning and in verbal playfulness that today enlivens much of the best critical utterance:

in the mass of materials which ingenious absurdity has thrown together genuine wit and useful knowledge may be sometimes found buried perhaps in grossness of expression.

Yet Johnson provides the grounds for a kind of minimal approval of what currently and compellingly challenges so much academic attention:

To write on their plan it was . . . necessary to read and think.

. . . their acuteness often surprises.

. . . they . . . sometimes struck out unexpected truth.

I may seem, grudgingly, to have opened only very small doors, but entrances do not always prepare us for what lies within. It is too early to know whether current criticism will produce the prose equivalent of a John Donne. Perhaps not. No one wants another Cleveland in any genre or form. But to be an Abraham Cowley would be far from an ignoble destiny – we certainly cannot fully understand the later seventeenth century or its transition to the eighteenth without him. And as our century dies into the next, we and our descendants will need all the illumination we can get, even from those who fall considerably short of greatness.

Note

1. I owe this and the preceding example to Wendell V. Harris's witty, ironic, but instructive 'glossary' in 'Contemporary Literary Criticism Made Easy', *The Western Humanities Review*, 37 (Summer 1983) pp. 147–53.

5

Philosophy, Theory and the 'Contest of Faculties': Saving Deconstruction from the Pragmatists CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

I

Literary critics interpret texts. By and large they get on without worrying too much about the inexplicit theories or principles that underwrite their practice. Some of them very actively resist the idea that such theories can be found, or that bringing them to light could serve any useful purpose. At its most obscurantist this attitude takes the Leavisian form of a downright refusal to engage in such discussion. Elsewhere distinctions are drawn between 'theory' and 'principle', the latter conceived as a realm of tacit values and assumptions beyond reach of further analysis. At a more philosophical level, the issue is joined by those in the 'hermeneutic' camp who argue that each and every act of understanding is embedded in a context of cultural meanings and presuppositions which can never be exhausted by rational explanation.¹ From this point of view there is simply no appeal to a higher 'theoretical' order of knowledge independent of cultural conditioning. To interpret a text is to enter, willingly or not, into the 'hermeneutic circle' which constitutes the basis of all understanding. Theory is deluded if it thinks to get a hold upon texts from some ideal vantage-point of pure disinterested knowledge.

On the other hand there are those who reject such arguments as merely a species of conservative pleading for the 'common-sense' status quo. They would argue that theory can indeed be justified in its claim to transcend the various kinds of neutralised or pre-reflective knowledge that make up a given cultural consensus. To

deny such a power vested in rational reflection is to give up the very idea of enlightened critique. If acted upon consistently it would amount to a vote of no confidence in reason itself, or the capacity of reason to criticise its own unexamined presuppositions. The 'hermeneutic circle' then becomes a pretext for conservative philosophies of language and culture which refuse to question the values implicit in the discourse of society at large. These objections have been argued most forcefully in recent years by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas.² Thought can indeed transcend its rootedness in cultural tradition and attain a standpoint of rational self-understanding from which to criticise 'common-sense' ideas. To deny this possibility, Habermas argues, is to yield up reflection to the forces of prejudice and mere cultural inertia. Rather we should see that the knowledge-constitutive interests which motivate our thinking are capable of a positive, emancipating thrust as well as the negative drive toward conformist dogma. Knowledge has an interest in removing those blocks to enlightened understanding which come of its attachment to a narrow, unreflective or positivist paradigm. Reason requires that its own claims-to-truth be constantly questioned through the kind of open, dialogical exchange which can only take place under conditions of free and reciprocal human understanding. Hence the appeal to what Habermas calls the 'ideal speech situation' intended as a yardstick by which to measure the past and present distortions of genuine rationality.³ Though it remains – of necessity – a purely hypothetical construct, this notion enables Habermas to mobilise the powers of reflective critique against the various forms of entrenched unreason that resist such dialogue. He can thus maintain a pragmatics of communicative discourse which engages with present social realities but also insists on the need for a higher ('meta-linguistic') dimension of critical enquiry.

This debate between Habermas and Gadamer has large implications for philosophy, criticism and every branch of the human sciences. What the issue comes down to at root is the choice between rival paradigms of reason, meaning and interpretation. On the one side are those advocates of 'hermeneutic' thinking who argue that all forms of knowledge – even the most abstract or theoretical – arise within a context of tacit assumptions and values which can never be reduced to any 'rational' explanation. On the other are thinkers like Habermas who reject such inherently conservative attitudes and argue that reason is equipped to under-

stand – and hence potentially to criticise and change – its background of motivating interests. Those who take this second (broadly rationalist) line are likely to play down the idea that the humanistic disciplines have their own distinct mode of intuitive or possibly pre-logical understanding. They will tend to regard such distinctions, in whatever sophisticated form, as a species of merely subjectivist retreat before the truth-claims of a science itself given over to unreflecting positivist method. Such thinkers (Habermas among them) want to re-establish the human sciences on the basis of a critical self-understanding which could also serve as a corrective model for other disciplines, the 'hard' sciences included. Hermeneutics would likewise challenge this distinction, but with wholly different ends in view. Here it would be a matter of denying that any one discipline (say, philosophy) could set up as a privileged discourse somehow more 'rigorous', or closer to the truth, than any other (say, literary criticism). In fact that relationship tends to be reversed, since the paradigm case of hermeneutic understanding is often sought in the encounter between literary text and responsive reader. From this standpoint it looks as though philosophy took a wrong turn when it moved toward logic and scientific method, rather than acknowledging its kinship with poetry and poetic understanding.

Richard Rorty, for one, argues that philosophy had better give up its delusions of intellectual grandeur and learn to regard itself as just another voice in the medley of present-day cultural exchange.⁴ He is frankly impatient with literary critics who think to make their discipline more 'rigorous' by hitching their waggon to some theory (of language, intentions or whatever) supposedly possessed of 'philosophic' dignity and truth. These critics, he claims, have not caught up with the simple fact that philosophy is no more a master-discipline – and no less subject to interpretative vagaries – than the practice of literary criticism. What these 'weak textualists' all have in common, according to Rorty, is 'a tendency to think that literature can take the place of philosophy by *mimicking* philosophy – by being, of all things, *epistemological*'.⁵ What they fail to see (unlike their 'strong textualist' counterparts) is the non-privileged status of philosophy as one kind of writing among others, and the pointlessness of setting up 'philosophic' theories as if they possessed some kind of ultimate, meta-linguistic truth. In the current state of play this gives a clear advantage to the undeceived critic who contents himself with offering 'strong' new readings of liter-

ary texts. To claim anything more – like a philosophic *theory* to back up those readings – is to miss the whole point, as Rorty sees it.

It is hardly surprising that these arguments have proved highly attractive to literary critics and not so convincing to tenured academic philosophers. Rorty thinks that philosophy still has a future, but only if it comes to see the error of its ways and takes up a decently moderating stance *vis-à-vis* the human sciences at large. And this means accepting that literary critics may well have the best of it at present. Quite simply, philosophy gives up its age-old legislative claims and settles down to the much less exalted business of *interpreting texts*. This shift is not dictated by any new 'theory' that would somehow *prove* that literary critics have the truth of the matter. It merely recognises that what is going on among literary intellectuals is currently more interesting, useful or productive than what is going on among philosophers. As Rorty puts it:

The claims of a usurping discipline to preside over the rest of culture can only be defended by an exhibition of its ability to put the other disciplines in their places. This is what the literary culture has been doing recently, with great success. . . . Science did not *demonstrate* that religion was wrong, nor philosophy that science was merely phenomenal, nor can modernist literature or textualist criticism *demonstrate* that the 'metaphysics of presence' is an outdated genre. But each in turn has managed, without argument, to make its point.⁶

'Without argument' because, in Rorty's view, no *argument* would serve to adjudicate the claims of such rival discourses. Their relative standing can only be assessed from time to time by deciding which has most to offer in the way of useful or relevant new ideas. Until recently it seemed (to philosophers at least) that the different kinds of knowledge could be slotted into a firm hierarchical structure, with philosophy either securely on top or in place among the rational foundations. Just what those foundations went down to at bottom was the main topic of debate. Rorty lists some of the candidates: 'clear and distinct ideas, sense-data, categories of the pure understanding, structures of prelinguistic consciousness and the like'.⁷ But this debate begins to look rather pointless, he thinks, with the growing recognition that paradigm-changes amount to nothing more than a shift of governing

metaphors or 'final vocabulary'. Philosophers had better make peace with this new situation and strike up dialogues wherever they can in the present state of intellectual conversation.

II

'In Defence of Reason' might have been the (somewhat grandiose) title for this essay. 'Rescuing Philosophy' would fit just as well, though it might seem more than a little presumptuous, coming from one who lacks any clear institutional authority to argue such a case. There is, of course, a handy line of defence in Rorty's suggestion that we scrap this old-fashioned way of carving up the disciplines and make 'philosophy' an open house to whatever is going on in the liveliest adjacent fields. The literary critic should be quick to see the benefits of a radical pragmatism like Rorty's, one that has the effect of levelling out truth-claims to a point where they all appear as options thrown up by different kinds of cultural self-interest. From a pragmatist viewpoint, Rorty writes, 'there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, protons and poems'.⁸ These objects are defined, for all practical purposes, by the role they play in this or that context of ongoing present debate. They are all just 'permanent possibilities for use, their cognitive status always open to "redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation"'. There is more comfort here for literary critics than philosophers, since critics are mostly in the business of interpreting texts. They stand to gain something in cultural self-esteem if it comes to be accepted that other disciplines are similarly placed, though without the same well-practised means of turning this position to advantage. 'Strong textualists' of whatever colour would apparently have reason to rejoice in Rorty's new dispensation.

I would argue, on the contrary, that critics – let alone philosophers – will be throwing too much away if they accept such pragmatist reasoning at anything like face value. Rorty would have it that literary theory is a pointless attempt to emulate philosophers on ground which they are anyway about to vacate for wider horizons and pastures new. Epistemology, as Rorty puts it,

still looks classy to weak textualists. They think that by viewing a poet as having an epistemology they are paying him a compli-

ment. They even think that in criticizing his theory of knowledge they are being something more than a mere critic – being, in fact, a philosopher.⁹

No doubt there is a good deal of cumbersome and misconceived pseudo-philosophy currently passed off upon credulous readers in the name of literary theory. But this hardly justifies Rorty's claim that the enterprise was wrong from the start and should now be viewed as just another chapter in the history of failed ideas. 'Hostility to theory', Terry Eagleton remarks, 'usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own.'¹⁰ Eagleton backs his position with a comment of John Maynard Keynes, whom he quotes as observing how 'those economists who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory'.

This should remind us that issues of politics are rarely far from the surface in any such debate between 'theory' and common-sense pragmatics. Free-market doctrine (the 'older theory' that Keynes alluded to) was based on the assumption that one did not need a worked out strategy of state intervention, since the economy would function best if left to establish its own equilibrium of prices, profits and wages. Rorty's pragmatist arguments look very much like extending this idea to the realm of philosophy and intellectual culture at large. 'Theory' is mistaken if it thinks to intervene and criticise notions which have got themselves decently established as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue. If there is no last appeal to ultimate truths ('clear and distinct ideas' and so on), then equally there is no firm vantage-point of theory from which to conduct such criticism. Rorty brings out this suggestive parallel with free-market economics in one of the metaphors he chooses to describe the pragmatist position. It is a matter of accepting, as he writes,

that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers.¹¹

Interventionist 'theory' would put this conversation out of joint by substituting abstract precepts for the working system of checks and balances that makes up a cultural tradition. Rorty is quite explicit in

equating this desirable context of debate with present-day North American consensus politics. It would hardly make sense, his argument implies, to mount the kind of 'wholesale' ideological critique which sought to break with that tradition and show up its prejudiced or distorting character. Thus Rorty clearly sides with Gadamer as against Habermas on the question of how far reason can go in backing up its own foundational truth-claims. If pressed to the point of saying what would *count* as 'undistorted communication', Habermas (according to Rorty) inevitably 'goes transcendental and offers principles'.

I am stating precisely the opposite case: that 'going transcendental' (or, as Habermas would have it, keeping faith with enlightened reason) cannot be simply dismissed as a species of outworn metaphysical delusion. This means running up against the kind of problem that Rorty would like to see removed from the agenda of worthwhile topics for discussion. These include the cognitive status of narrative explanations and – as against Rorty – the reasons for not adopting a thoroughgoing pragmatist position. In each case one is open to the Rortyan charge of being hooked on age-old problems which philosophy should now put away, having arrived at a more realistic sense of its own powers and limitations. In so far as the argument rebuts that charge, it is by showing that the problems in question are not so easily pushed out of view, or only by spans of a pragmatist counter-philosophy which carries its own specific charge of ideological assumptions. The move to foreclose on certain 'technical' aspects of epistemological critique is then seen as falling in all too readily with the interests of a present-day cultural status quo.

An important part of this argument has to do with deconstructionist literary theory, a development which Rorty views with some interest, though for largely tactical reasons. What he likes about Derrida is his refusal to *play the game* of philosophy on rules made up by all those 'serious' thinkers, from Kant on down, who have thought to find 'constructive' answers to genuine problems. What he does not like so much is the other, more rigorous form of deconstructionist argument which looks like rejoining that same superannuated line. On his good side it is a game of wits between 'bad brother Derrida' and 'honest old uncle Kant'. On his retrograde side, as Rorty sees it, Derrida 'succumbs to nostalgia, to the lure of philosophical system building, and specifically that of constructing yet another transcendental idealism'.¹² Deconstruc-

tion, in short, is a kind of abortive or half-hearted pragmatist venture. It is willing to dispense with most of the truth-claims and illusions of method which have so far served to prop up an ailing philosophical enterprise. But it still has this unfortunate (Kantian) tendency to take its own arguments seriously and – like Habermas – to ‘go transcendental’ at the drop of a hat.

It is rare enough to find philosophers admitting that they have read Derrida, let alone writing about him (as Rorty does) with a measure of sympathetic insight. For a literary critic to reject Rorty’s reading might seem like a case not merely of looking a gift-horse in the mouth, but kicking it squarely in the teeth. All the same, I want to urge that deconstruction is *not*, as Rorty would have it, an offshoot of pragmatism merely too precocious to recognise its own true lineage. In the case of Paul de Man especially, the drive to demystify traditional concepts of philosophic truth goes along with a rigorous thinking-through of their textual and their epistemological consequences. In his late essay ‘The Resistance to Theory’ de Man has some pertinent reflections on the motives that work to assimilate deconstruction to other, more conventional kinds of activity.¹³ He picks out its single most subversive aspect as the power to problematise relations between logic, grammar and rhetoric, the latter (through its surplus of ‘deviant’ figuration) undermining the assurance of a ‘proper’ relationship between language and thought. This certainly looks like an attack on traditional epistemology from the standpoint of a thorough-going deconstructive rhetoric of tropes. But it also holds out against the kind of accommodating pragmatist ‘solution’ which Rorty sees beckoning at the end of every road. De Man remains the most rigorous of anti-philosophers, undermining the truth-claims of epistemology only by way of an exhaustively thought-out rhetorical critique.

This leads on directly to the question—much canvassed by Marxist critics – of the *politics* of deconstruction. The aspects which Rorty picks out for approval are those that give rise to the Marxist claim that deconstruction is really nothing more than a species of Nietzschean reactionary creed indifferent to history, politics and reason alike. Such polemics might seem justified in light of what Rorty has to say about Derrida’s textual strategies. Thus he writes, for example, that Derrida wants to hang onto Hegel’s historical way of doing philosophy, though ‘without its teleology, its sense of direction, its seriousness’.¹⁴ This would ultimately point to a pragmatist conclusion, a ‘naturalized Hegelianism’, as Rorty puts

it, minus all the needless machinery of theory, dialectics and mediating concepts. What always drops out in the pragmatist argument is any form of ideological critique which would challenge that 'naturalised' relation between history, reason and present-day consensus values. From Rorty's reading of Derrida (at least on its 'positive' side) the Marxist might well feel confirmed in a blanket diagnosis of 'American deconstruction' as yet another form of disguised apologetics for the intellectual status quo.

But this is to ignore the demystifying thrust of those deconstructive arguments which do precisely bear on the workings of common-sense or naturalised perception. De Man puts the claim most strongly in a passage from 'The Resistance to Theory'.

What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence.¹⁵

These sentences would stand a good deal of conceptual unpacking. What they help to explain at this stage is the fact that the politics of any given theory are not to be read off directly in terms of its commitment (or otherwise) to a realist ontology of language and reference. The Marxist hostility towards deconstruction is most often expressed in precisely those terms: by attacking the so-called 'idealist' leanings of a theory which operates in the problematic space between conflicting codes of textual representation. Thus Rorty and the Marxists are oddly united in condemning what they see as deconstruction's tendency to 'go transcendental'. I argue, on the contrary, that it is only by preserving this moment of epistemological critique that philosophy (or literary theory) can keep its effective radical edge. The passage from de Man goes on to make this point with more than a touch of self-vindicating passion.

Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say, ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx's *German Ideology*.¹⁶

This is to argue that the power of textual theory to demystify common-sense assumptions is all the more effective for its radically suspending doctrinaire (phenomenalist) notions of meaning and reference. It is also to insist, *contra* Rorty, that the business of epistemological critique remains very much on the agenda, for politics as well as philosophy.

This is why it is vital to refuse the Rortyan option of collapsing philosophy into literary criticism, or a version of literary criticism which excludes 'theory' as just one more effort to smuggle philosophy in by the back door. De Man once again tries to pinpoint what is at issue in this present-day 'conflict of the faculties'. Literary theory, he writes, is a 'relatively autonomous version of questions that also surface . . . in philosophy, though not necessarily in a clearer and more rigorous form'.¹⁷ Philosophy has tended to bypass the problems of coming to terms with its own textual or rhetorical constitution. Literary theory (at least since the advent of deconstruction) has made these problems its peculiar concern, and in this sense moved into regions of enquiry closed off to 'philosophy' as such. This is *not* to say, with Rorty, that philosophy should henceforth be treated as just one 'kind of writing' along with all the others that make up a flourishing culture. Rather it is to argue that deconstructive theory has uncovered certain problematic aspects of philosophy which can now be thought through in more rigorous fashion *without* losing sight of philosophy's distinctive concerns.

Aesthetics is one of those contested sectors in the philosophic enterprise where de Man locates these unsettling tensions at work. It is here that reflection has tended to pass, as if unproblematically, from the level of idealised speculative *concepts* to the level of first-order concrete *perception*. In so doing, according to de Man, it has contrived to short-circuit the rhetorical problems which a deconstructive reading brings to light. It is in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* that these blind spots of argument are most clearly revealed. Aesthetics for Kant (as for Hegel after him) occupies a far from marginal place in the systematic project of philosophy.¹⁸ It is the ground on which 'pure' and 'practical' reasons are notionally reconciled, where *a priori* concepts are thought to find their validating content of sensuous perception. Aesthetic judgement thus tends towards a moment of phenomenalist reduction which seeks a grounding in sensory experience but fails to give an adequately argued account of that grounding. Literary theory (as opposed to 'philosophy' in this respect at least) shows up these questionable

passages of argument in the form of unlooked-for textual aberrations.

This may help to explain the common misreading of de Man which takes him to deny all practical commerce between language and reality. 'In a genuine semiology', he writes, 'the referential function of language is not being denied – far from it; what is in question is its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition.'¹⁹ Aesthetics is the critical ground on which this authority has often been claimed by philosophers. In deconstructing such claims, de Man is simultaneously opening a space for reflection on the *ideological* motives that work to naturalise a certain model of 'common-sense' thought and perception. A critical reading of Roger Scruton's aesthetics might come at these questions from a similar angle. It would ask, to begin with, what interests are involved in the mode of argument which grants the 'aesthetic understanding' a privileged place above matters of theory and ideological reflection. It is not, Scruton argues, '*subtlety* that is required in order to make the theory of history relevant to aesthetics'. More specifically: the question of the relevance of theory 'can only be decided from the standpoint of aesthetics, and is not a question for the theory itself to answer'.²⁰ It is the function of such argumentative moves to cut out theoretical reflection at precisely the point where it might undermine the supposedly self-evident truths of aesthetic understanding.

Scruton stands in a line of conservative critic-philosophers, from Burke to T. S. Eliot, who valorise the aesthetic by placing it beyond reach of ideological critique. Eliot discovered a whole range of techniques for achieving this desired separation of realms. For Donne, he wrote, 'a thought . . . was an experience; it modified his sensibility'.²¹ Thought and feeling existed in a state of harmonious adjustment which required no elaborate provision of *theory* to adjudicate their claims. This happy condition Eliot equated with the kind of 'organic' culture which supposedly flourished in English society prior to the turmoils of the Civil War period. What then came to pass – according to this influential myth – was a wholesale 'dissociation of sensibility', such that the qualities of thought and emotion tended to separate out and develop in a state of unhealthy isolation. The Romantics inherited this deep-laid cultural *malaise*, the effects of which – in their poetry and criticism alike – Eliot was quick to diagnose. What he chiefly deplored was the strain of 'undisciplined' emotional licence, along with the

increased self-consciousness trained upon the workings of poetic creativity and feeding on its own deep conflicts of motive. Hence the need, as Eliot saw it, for a strict demarcation of bounds between philosophy and literary criticism. Otherwise the critic would be all too easily seduced from his proper vocation by 'the sad ghost of Coleridge, beckoning from the shades'. Coleridge typifies, for Eliot, the literary intellectual in whom abstract reflection gets the upper hand over unforced, spontaneous creativity.²² This cautionary tale goes to reinforce the message: that 'theory' and criticism do not mix, or only at the cost of dissociating thought from its natural element of lived experience.

Thus Eliot, like Rorty, sees nothing but multiplied error and delusion in criticism's desire to 'go transcendental' and look for legitimating theories beyond its first-order practical concerns. It is the critic's proper business, as Eliot defines it, to pass as directly as possible from detailed local perception to generalised statements of method and principle. This is what he found most perfectly embodied in Aristotle's practice: 'intelligence itself, operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition'.²³ One can see how an essay like 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' sets out to emulate this classicist ideal. On the one hand there are those passages of exemplary 'close reading' which exerted such an influence on later critics. On the other there is the constant readiness to let drop statements of an offhand nature on such large questions as the limits of ethical individualism, the metaphysics of identity and (of course) the concept of 'tradition' itself. What is excluded in the process is any kind of reasoned *theoretical* account of how language achieves (or fails to achieve) that harmonious inwardness of thought and emotion which Eliot so prizes in a poet like Donne. There is something distinctly disingenuous about Eliot's statement that 'this essay proposes to halt at the frontiers of metaphysics'.²⁴ In fact it contains a good deal of 'metaphysical' argument, though presented in such a way as to side-step the awkward middle-ground of theory. Practical criticism can thus get on with the business of sharpening its local perceptions, while the essay advances its larger (ideological) claims without risking any kind of detailed *textual* engagement.

The 'Perfect critic' is therefore one who lives up to that ideal of co-operative thought and sensibility which marks out the finest of seventeenth-century verse. This paradigm seemingly holds for all time, no matter what changes might since have been wrought by

the fall from metaphysical grace. Indeed, this collapse of history itself into a timeless, idealised 'tradition' – an imaginary museum of cultural exhibits – goes along with Eliot's resistance to all forms of mediating theory. Tradition is conceived as the co-ordinating medium of ideas, perceptions and values which rise clean above the crass contingencies of historical event. The poet, in Eliot's well-known phrase, must write with a sense of the entire European tradition immemorially 'in his bones'. Such deep-laid sympathies will hardly permit themselves to suffer disturbance by reflecting too nicely on the complex mediations of history, language and 'tradition'. They exist in a sealed-off aesthetic domain where perception is raised directly into abstract principle, leaving no room for theory on the one hand or historical reflection on the other. Scruton is yet more doctrinaire in his claims for the primacy of aesthetic understanding. His strategies of argument fully bear out what de Man has to say about the mystification of philosophic discourse through its constantly resorting to aesthetics as a means of short-circuiting rational critique. They also lend colour to de Man's strongest claim: that deconstruction has radical effects precisely in so far as it suspends the common-sense equation between language and the order of phenomenal experience.

III

Deconstruction thus engages with philosophy at those points of more or less visible strain where philosophy fails to follow up its own more rigorous *textual* implications. In this sense it substitutes a 'literary' reading – a reading trained up on techniques of rhetorical analysis – for other, more conventionally 'philosophical' forms of argument. Yet it also refuses the pragmatist option of declaring philosophy henceforth redundant, except in so far as it renounces all claim to epistemological rigour. Deconstruction goes counter to received ideas of what 'philosophy' is about, but only by consistently pressing those ideas beyond their presumed self-evident basis in the nature of phenomenal perception. De Man's reading of Kantian aesthetics exemplifies this double movement of thought. It may be the case (stage one of his argument) that Kant is passing off tropes as concepts, presenting not so much a strict transcendental deduction as 'a story, a dramatized scene of the mind in action'.²⁵ But this is not to licence a last-ditch retreat from the claims of

philosophical critique. Ideology and criticism may be 'interdependent' to the point of creating all manner of confusion in texts which strive to keep them apart. But simply to *collapse* that distinction – as the pragmatist argument implies – is to give up all hopes of rational understanding. In De Man's words:

Philosophies that succumb to ideology lose their epistemological sense, whereas philosophies that try to bypass ideology lose all critical thrust and risk being repossessed by what they foreclose.²⁶

This is the aspect of deconstruction – the moment of ideological critique – which tends to be ignored by its Marxist detractors, as well as by 'post-modern' pragmatists like Rorty. De Man's deconstructive 'allegories of reading' have nothing in common with the pragmatist insistence that theory should at last give way before the levelling regime of first-order narrative conventions.

Critical theory has its work cut out for the present in maintaining a sense of this crucial distinction. Without it, thought seems destined to collapse into a state of passive acquiescence to the myths, ideologies and naturalised half-beliefs which make up common sense wisdom. Already there are those, like Jean-François Lyotard,²⁷ who welcome this emergent 'revolution' of attitudes as a sign of long-delayed cultural maturity. Lyotard's case can be summarised roughly as follows. Philosophers (political theorists especially) have always cast their ideas in some kind of *narrative* form. Mostly they have wanted to disguise that fact, as by shifting from a first-order 'natural' narrative to a higher plane of understanding where the story would yield up its true (for example 'dialectical') significance. What the post-modern era signifies, according to Lyotard, is an end to all such consoling myths of intellectual mastery and truth. Straightforward narratives are all we have, their significance strictly a matter of what *makes sense*, in the way of explanations, at any given stage of cultural history.

This diagnosis bears a striking resemblance to Rorty's account of post-Kantian philosophy. In each case the upshot is a summons to put away the false meta-narrative security of system and method, and to come out fully on the side of 'post-modern' pragmatism. Politically the message is equally clear: that all those totalising schemes of explanation (Marxist meta-narratives especially) are henceforth redundant since nothing could intelligibly count as

supporting their truth-claims. The position is the same (so this argument would have it) in philosophy and the human sciences at large. The time is long past when it was rational to place any faith in theories which sought to criticise their own native culture from a standpoint of masterly detachment. Such perspectives are deemed irrelevant from the standpoint of a generalised social consensus which sets its own terms for debate. The only kind of argument which then makes sense is the kind that sticks to naturalised narrative pragmatics and surrenders all claim to a higher (dialectical) order of knowledge.

The Utopian aspect of Lyotard's argument comes from his belief that modern technology is evolving away from its repressive uses as an instrument of centralised power and control. He predicts that the spread of information networks will break down monopolistic structures of authority and work to promote the free circulation of ideas. As the networks become more densely interactive, so society will learn to make do without absolute legitimating truths, and to live with its own kinds of 'narrative' understanding. What counts as viable 'knowledge' will be wholly determined by the complex systems of power and interest which make up the totality of social relations. The destinies of post-modern culture are seen as interlocking at every point with those of post-industrial society. The arts and sciences are alike subject to a process of 'delegitimation' which removes their transcendent ('meta-narrative') authority and opens them up to all the winds of cultural change. 'Linguistic practice' and 'performative power' thus become the only effective measures of a statement's truth, since truth is what holds for a given society at a given stage in its cultural evolution. As Lyotard writes:

The performativity of an utterance, be it denotative or prescriptive, increases proportionally to the amount of information about its referent one has at one's disposal. Thus the growth of power, and its self-legitimation, are now taking the route of data-storage and accessibility, and the operativity of information.²⁸

Lyotard sees clearly enough that there is another possible upshot to this story, one which would turn the new technology into a 'dream machine' for the purposes of ever-more sophisticated social control. But these doubts count for less than his hopeful belief that truth and power are already well on the way to being 'delegiti-

mized', and that socio-political structures must inevitably soon follow suit. Thus: 'the ideology of communicational "transparency"', which goes hand in hand with the commercialization of knowledge, will begin to perceive the State as a factor of opacity and "noise"'.²⁹ Such reflections enable Lyotard to sustain a broadly optimistic viewpoint alongside (or despite) his technological-determinist creed.

It will be seen how this puts him squarely at odds with a thinker like Habermas, committed to the quest for legitimating principles of reason while acknowledging the forms of 'repressive rationality' that work to distort those principles. The only point of contact between Habermas and Lyotard is that both diagnose a deep-lying crisis in the present state of cultural and scientific knowledge. From here on their reasonings are sharply divergent. Habermas reflects the consensus view of truth entailed by Lyotard's pragmatist outlook. He seeks a way beyond the present 'legitimation crisis' by recalling the Enlightenment tradition of rational critique. Lyotard denies that such ideas can be of any use in the post-modern context of debate. And where Habermas would criticise our present 'distorted' rationality from the standpoint of enlightened reason, Lyotard sees no possible *grounds* for any such argument. There is no last appeal beyond the 'rational' norms which decide what shall count as genuine contributions to knowledge at any given time. For Lyotard, reason is a product of consensus and can only be judged in light of its 'performative' status or its role in furthering the present aims of knowledge. For Habermas, conversely, it is vital that reason should transcend all forms of unreflective cultural consensus in the quest for a better, more enlightened rationality. And among the social forces which resist such understanding is precisely that pragmatist equation of *truth* and *power* – or knowledge and instrumental reason – which Lyotard so readily accepts.

This is no merely academic debate. The appeal to first-order 'narrative' pragmatics comes down to a self-denying ordinance placed upon critical reason. It is consensus, thus loosely conceived, that blinds 'public opinion' to the deep contradictions that show up repeatedly when people state their views on this or that matter of political concern. Opinion polls are the mass-media equivalent to Lyotard's idea of naturalised narrative awareness. They work, that is to say, by tacitly resolving the conflicts of rational judgement into a realm of imaginary popular consensus. Thought gives way

to the collective self-image of society sustained by myths of 'democratic' freedom and involvement. Thus we urgently need to resist the idea that deconstructive readings always come down to a species of liberal-pragmatist faith in the present-day cultural status quo. On the contrary: the point of deconstruction is to argue with the utmost *logical* rigour to conclusions which may yet be counter-intuitive or at odds with common-sense (consensual) wisdom. And it is here, I would argue, that critical theory is most effectively deployed in questioning the stereotypes and cultural self-images of the age. The resistance it has met within various quarters – not least among professional philosophers – is perhaps the best measure of this salutary power to disturb.

Notes

1. See especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London, 1975).
2. See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (London, 1974).
3. See Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London, 1979).
4. See the essays collected in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1982).
5. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 72.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xx.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
10. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983) p. vii.
11. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 87.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
13. Paul de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory', in Barbara Johnson (ed.), *The Pedagogical Imperative* (Yale French Studies 63, 1982) pp. 3–20.
14. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 112.
15. Paul de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory', p. 11.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
18. See Paul de Man, 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst, Mass., 1984) pp. 121–44.
19. De Man, 'The Resistance to Theory', p. 11.
20. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding* (London, 1983) p. 8.
21. T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays* (London, 1964) pp. 241–50, p. 247.

22. See T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1946) p. 156.
23. See T. S. Eliot, 'The Perfect Critic', in *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1928) pp. 1–16.
24. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 3–11.
25. De Man, 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', p. 124.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
27. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, Minn., 1983).
28. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

6

The Marxism Deconstruction Debate in Literary Theory

MICHAEL RYAN

I will argue that the debate between Marxists and deconstructionists in literary theory is in part a false one, at least from a Marxist perspective. The work of certain deconstructive literary critics like Paul de Man is relevant to a Marxist critique of ideology. And deconstructive theorists like Christopher Norris are not entirely correct in maintaining that deconstruction is antithetical to Marxism. Similarly the Marxist critics of deconstruction frequently misread basic deconstructive concepts like 'textuality' (which they take to mean a kind of literariness, when in fact it describes a spatialisation and a relationality that is in many ways congruent with such Marxist notions as practice and meditation), and they mistake as nihilistic an anti-idealist and anti-positivist affirmation of the irreducibility of the practical mechanics of rhetoric to pre-Marxian concepts of ideal thematics or unmediated objectivity, when in fact it is in keeping with a Marxist interest in the way practice mediates both ideality and materiality. I will first review the debate between Marxists and deconstructionists; then I will say why I think a deconstructionist like de Man can be useful to Marxists; and I will conclude with some comments on the relevance of deconstruction to a Marxist cultural criticism.

Marxists have criticised deconstruction for ignoring the historical and social dimension of texts while pursuing a neo-New-Critical formalism that autonomises literature and deifies rhetoric. To the deconstructionists, on the other hand, Marxists are dogmatic totalisers or naïve referentialists who regulate the liberal freedom of reference by pinning it down to one meaning or one referent in the extra-textual world. But conservative or anti-Marxist deconstructionists cannot justify within their own framework the fact that

their rejection of Marxist socio-historical referentialism is itself a symptom of a socio-historical referent – the liberal philosophic tradition of freedom from external constraint or determination (in this case, freedom from reference). For the Marxists, the deconstructionists are guilty of an irrationalist mystification that demolishes the rational basis necessary for a criticism of capitalism and for the construction of a rational society. Too frequently, however, the literary critical Marxists' back-to-basics appeal is indistinguishable from contemporary cultural conservatism in its attack on modernity.

I will first review the debate between Marxist and deconstructionist critics, concentrating on Norris, Eagleton and Jameson.

Christopher Norris in his *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*¹ reduces all deconstruction to an assertion of the rights of language or rhetoric over reason. He is not altogether correct in doing so because Derrida's work is not formalist in the Yale School sense. In a gesture symptomatic of the Yale approach, Norris ignores the fact that the concept of textuality in Derrida does not refer to literary texts. Textuality names an irrepressibility of reference that undoes the opposition between text and world, and, therefore, it is one term in Derrida's larger project of undoing such binary oppositions as life and death, theory and practice, mind and body, nature and culture, and so on. Like Marx, Derrida believes that the order of knowledge and the process of the world are stitched into each other; there is no realm of pure ideas. Norris and the Yale School deflect this quasi-materialist and historicist insight into an assertion of the autonomy of rhetoric and of the unreadability of texts. What it means is that one can never isolate a realm of pure ideal semantics that is not made possible and simultaneously undermined as such by a syntax whose very differential nature contains the possibility of generating infinite semantic effects. What enables efficient understanding and positivist knowledge is something that is itself not amenable to such knowledge. It is, if I can be permitted to use Marxist terms to describe it, a domain of practice and mediation (or history and society, if you will) that allows knowledge to occur without it ever being possible that this domain be subsumed by a knowledge that would not be historical and social, practical and mediated: that is, a knowledge that would either be purely ideal (non-historical and non-material) or purely positive (that is, unmediated by the situation in which it occurs and by the linguistic vehicle that permits it to occur).

It is necessary to distinguish between the Yale School and

Derrida in this way because Marxist literary theorists argue that deconstructive antinomies in texts must be read as expressing social contradictions. Because there always is a strong relationship between how knowledge is conceived and practised in a society and the way social institutions are arranged, the Marxist argument has some validity, although it would be necessary to recast it somewhat, as I shall argue later. Every time a text deconstructs, it does not, unfortunately, reflect or express a crisis of capitalism. Nevertheless the Yale School can be held guilty of shunting aside the social and political (latent and overt) possibilities of Derrida's text. Norris gives an inadvertent indication of this when he cites a passage in Derrida concerning 'a system of linguistico-social differences' and ignores the word 'social'. Not surprisingly those texts in French where Derrida does deal with institutional questions remain for the most part untranslated.² An indication of why that might be the case can be garnered by attending any deconstructive literary critical gathering; the level of political insipidness is out-paced only by the level of personal pretension.

Norris presents Derrida as a rhetorical critic in the Yale School mould. On the basis of this debatable conflation, he goes on to claim that 'deconstruction is inimical to Marxist thought at the point where it questions the validity of *any* science or method set up in rigid separation from the play of textual meaning' (p. 83). Now 'Marxist thought' is a broad category that includes many discourses besides literary criticism, discourses that share certain lines of attack with Derridean deconstruction. I think of Antonio Negri, the political theorist of the Italian Autonomy movement, whose *Marx Beyond Marx*, a reading of the *Grundrisse*,³ finds a thematic of scission, difference and open-endedness in Marx that would not be incompatible with some deconstructive conclusions. Derrida himself, in the preface to *Dissemination*, notices in Marx 'a space at once general and infinitely differentiated'.

Thus is sketched out the dysymmetrical space of a postscript to the Great Logic. . . . No doubt as apparently dependent and derivative as a postscript can be, it is nonetheless a force of historical non-return, resistant to any circular recomprehension within the anamnestic domesticity (*Erinnerung*) of Logos, which would recover and proclaim truth in the fullness of its speech.⁴

Norris, significantly, never discusses Marx, and he skirts Derrida's positive remarks concerning Marx's work.

By 'Marxist thought', Norris means only structuralist literary criticism, especially the early work of Terry Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology*. His criticism of Eagleton's Althusserian scientism is accurate, and this is confirmed by Eagleton's own later renunciation of his earlier Althusserian position in his recent book on Benjamin. But there is also much in common between the Marxist and the deconstructive critiques of idealism, and Norris fails to pursue this possible articulation in large part because he defines deconstruction too narrowly as the affirmation of 'an open-ended free play of rhetorical transcoding – with the ideal of an infinitely "plural" text' that is 'resistant to the purposes of Marxist criticism' (p. 79). What he fails to point out is that dissemination and textuality (the overrunning of all semantic and categorical boundaries by a referential displacement that never can be absorbed into a final ground that does not itself exist in a web of reference) point out the non-natural, non-self-evidential character of all institutional, disciplinary, methodological, categorical, logical, historical and semantic frames. As Derrida suggests in *Deconstruction and Criticism*:

A text . . . is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text over-runs all the limits assigned to it so far . . . – all the limits, everything that was set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth).⁵

(It should be pointed out that by 'writing', Derrida, as in *Of Grammatology*, here means both the graphic of spatialisation that meditates all ideality and the general process of difference that allows identity and substantiality to come into being without itself being reducible to an identitarian ontology; he does not mean only what he calls 'writing-in-the-narrow-sense', although that is one region of the larger process of difference and spatialisation, a process I would argue is related to Marxist notions of mediation and practice.) Derrida's argument in the above passage is in fact against the sort of autonomisation of rhetoric that the Yale School promotes. One cannot distinguish between text and world, by

positing the world as a presence or substance that exists apart from the processes of constitutive difference that characterise literary texts. To say the world is text is to say equally or undecidably that the text is world. What this implies is that Derrida's critique of categorical frames in philosophy might relate to the critique of ideology in the social world. Such frames keep things in their proper place, and that essentially is the task of ideology.

If deconstructionists like Norris feel obliged to define deconstruction in anti-Marxist terms, Marxists seem no less moved to safeguard Marxism (at least in its Althusserian rationalist and Hegelian universalist varieties) from the threat of anarchy that deconstruction seems to pose. This is in part due to a failure to distinguish strains of deconstruction from each other and to grant the possibility that deconstruction might be put to radical uses. Social scientists like John Yrchik and Dennis Crow use it positively as a critical method. Crow uses it to criticise the ideology of public administration, and Yrchik argues deconstructively that business strategies of self-management for workers constitute inclusions that actually exclude workers from power.⁶

Two leading Marxist literary theorists, Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, deal with deconstruction in different ways, and each way has its problems. More than Jameson, Eagleton is disposed to contend with deconstruction on its own terms and to change his own positions as a result of his confrontation with it. He successfully uses deconstructive methods in the excellent chapter on the ideology of literary form in *Criticism and Ideology*. In *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Literary Criticism*, he both criticises deconstruction and suggests that it can be a radical critical instrument. He sounds positively Derridean in the last section of the book, a discussion of the political potential of irony and parody, when he asserts that 'there is always something that escapes comic emplotment, a pure residue of difference that is non-dialectizable'.⁷ And in his recent book – *The Rape of Clarissa* – he adopts outright a deconstructionist method to undermine Richardson's ideological pretensions and to derive progressive implications from a conservative text.⁸

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson also accepts certain deconstructive arguments, but he rejects its ultimate radicality and absorbs it into a totalising criticism. Nevertheless he argues that Marxists should learn from deconstruction by creating new anti-transcendental hermeneutic models. And by defining ideology as

strategies of containment, Jameson suggests (without developing the idea) a way in which the deconstruction of categorical frames and the Marxist critique of ideology might work together.⁹

Jameson could be accused of being too hasty in his sublation of deconstruction. He fails to distinguish the Yale School from Derrida, and therefore he claims that dissemination (the Derridean term that names the uncontrollable referentiality that results from the fact that the differential process that constitutes meaning always leaves open the possibility that meaning might be torn out of its apparent stability by lateral or syntagmatic offshoots that undermine vertical or paradigmatic closure, by leading meanings astray, allowing them to be misinterpreted, and giving rise to unintended effects) is merely a reflex of the irrationalism of the capitalist market, where commodities shuttle about without any anchor or any rational control. But that irrationalism is only apparent, and only apparently irrational. Consumer culture is in fact structured in a highly determined and 'rational' way by strictly enforced laws of efficiency and profitability. It is not in the least disseminatory, in the Derridean sense. In addition, dissemination is a concept that undermines the very rationalist ideology that justifies market culture. That ideology claims the market is a matter of rational choices that balance themselves in a rational proportion of supply and demand. The rational choice ideology assumes a harmony of conscious intention and effect, and the concept of dissemination describes why such harmony is never fully possible. But to understand why dissemination might be ideology critical in this instance, one must first grasp that it is not an irrationalist concept, and, in addition, one must see how consumer market culture, rather than being irrationalist, is in fact rationalist in the extreme.

It is more difficult to find problems with Eagleton's more positive use of deconstruction. At one point, however, he argues that the textual aporias deconstruction locates must be referred to social contradictions.¹⁰ It might be more accurate to say that the problem that rhetoricity and undecidability pose for the efficiency-oriented positivism and the domination-legitimizing idealism of bourgeois philosophy has a specificity and a political relevance that is sufficiently important in itself without being referred to other areas of contradiction in capitalism that those problems merely 'express'. The domain of knowledge is itself a terrain of political struggle, and this struggle is not merely theoretical. It has to do with the

practical philosophic and academic institutions that reproduce domination, and it is connected by institutional relay to the political economic institutions of capitalism. The struggle, therefore, has a regional and tactical specificity that does not need to be referred to other social contradictions in order to acquire political relevance. Nevertheless it is true that the notions of rhetoricity and undecidability need to be given a political description that flushes out their political importance as interruptions of the sorts of knowledge appropriate to capitalist efficiency and domination.

Finally, both Eagleton and Jameson fail to historicise deconstruction. There is a tendency among Marxists to see deconstruction erroneously as a non-historical critique of all rational procedures. I have been using the word *rationalist* in discussing market ideology because the kind of non-ethical, scientistic reason that underwrites that ideology arose at a determinable point in time – the seventeenth century – and its transformation into both technocratic rationalism and objectivism – free of market ideology – can be plotted historically. Thomas Spragens calls this tradition ‘liberal Reason’.¹¹ Although Derrida does criticise classical philosophy, I believe his critique, within its immediate historical context, is essentially a radical response to liberal Reason that promotes a more socialised, historicist and ethical way of thinking. (And as an aside, let me say that his critique is not specific to the French scene. The free-market ideology of the US may seem more decentred and open in comparison to French State centralism, but both derive from liberal Reason, one from its technocratic side, the other from its value-free objectivist side.)

Derrida’s work might thus be relevant to the Marxist project of critiquing the ideology and the conceptual basis of capitalist patriarchal social institutions. But can the Yale School, which derives in part from Derrida, also generate results that benefit this project? Although I suggested that Derrida and the Yale School must be distinguished, it is not true that their work has nothing whatsoever to do with his. The difference is due primarily to two operations – their focusing and limiting of his critical philosophy to the professional and institutional requisites of literary criticism and their ignoring of his political leftism in favour of the pluralism that is one dominant ideology of the American academic scene. Nevertheless I will argue that some of their work has something to offer Marxist political criticism, namely a criticism that directly relates critical reading to social problems. Political criticism is a necessary con-

sequence of the interaction of deconstructive philosophy and Marxist literary theory, for what that interaction shows is that discursive operations in texts cannot be declared an other to a real presence or substance in society; social life is itself constituted as a network (both structure and play) of representations, relations and discursive practices. Social meaning, like literary textual meaning, is constructed by representations and discourses; it is not of the nature of a pre-discursive 'truth' that appears in an unmediated luminousness to the mind. In addition, social structure and activity is an agonistic texture of relations, not, as conservatives claim, an organic or natural process, nor, as liberals claim, a happy multiplicity that somehow attains unity. There is no unity or natural meaning or truth to those conflicting social relations; they consist of scissions without closure or determinacy, an unstable relation of force between contending parties. (To deny a conservative natural truth or a liberal harmonious unity to these relations is not to say that they cannot be understood rationally.)

Ironically enough, perhaps, it is the purest of the Yale School deconstructionists who flushes out most successfully what R. M. Unger calls the 'antinomies of liberalism'.¹² Paul de Man, in his reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, one of the great statements of liberal theory, makes no pretensions to political criticism.¹³ Yet what he essentially does is provide a rhetorical description of the deconstructive antinomies between individual and society and between cognition and volition that runs through liberal social theory from Locke to Mill and down to the present. In what amounts to a critique of ideology, de Man demonstrates how deconstruction in Rousseau's text reveals differences that undermine the metaphoric totalisation that creates the illusion of identity in words like man, self, property and state. More politically pertinent is de Man's contention that a single entity, like a piece of property, belongs to two divergent and incompatible systems of meaning in Rousseau's text, as indeed it also does in liberal capitalist society. The fact that no stable identity of property exists in the text can be taken as an indication of the fact that no such identity exists in liberal society either. The only rhetorical and political recourse for Rousseau is to create a 'Law given' whose imperative performative utterances resolve these antinomies through an exercise of discursive authority. Without seeming to intend it, de Man has provided a rhetorical analysis of what underlines a very real problem in contemporary capitalist ideology

– its inability to resolve its internal antinomies, between self and society, private and public, cognition and volition, rights and responsibilities, in any way other than through a recourse to a metaphoric and political instance of authority. Liberalism can only survive by relapsing into the very political form it deconstructed – authoritarianism. Its pretence to harmony deconstructs, and no social or political form, founded on a similar occlusion of difference (between classes, races and sexes), can escape a similar deconstruction. Difference, which constitutes all the entities that an ideological social theory like liberalism gives out to be self-identical – property, self, state and so on – cannot be occluded. When capitalist liberalism deconstructs due to irresolvable antinomies, the fascists reach for their total state (the technocratic side of liberal Reason) or for their totally free, though heavily policed, market (the value-free, objectivist side of liberal Reason). Not that reason instigates these resolutions; it legitimates them.

Jameson and Eagleton are thus in part right to say that textual aporias must be referred to social contradictions, but it seems to be equally true that social ideology has a rhetorical dimension the revelation of which can be directly useful to Marxists. The deconstruction of the text-world opposition has led to an idealist autonomisation of rhetoric, but that deconstruction can also lead to an examination of the textuality of the world – for example the antinomic undecidability and discursivity of such crucial terms to liberal capitalist ideology as freedom.

It is in the domain of cultural criticism that deconstruction seems most relevant to the critique of ideology. Ideology should be understood here in two senses: as the cultural apparatus that reproduces class, race and sex domination, and as the personal and public cognitive and emotive forces that produce a misapprehension of reality on the part of dominated people. In an inegalitarian society, there should be conflict and revolutions; ideology works against such conflict by making inequality seem natural and eternal and by legitimating the use of force against those who challenge existing power relations. With the help of police power, ideology helps prevent the material tensions as well as the institutional antinomies inherent in an inegalitarian society from erupting into revolution.

Versions of a deconstructive critique of ideology in the realm of cultural criticism have been most successfully developed in recent years by British thinkers like Stuart Hall, Annette Kuhn, Stephen

Heath, Catherine Belsey and Tony Bennet. Essentially the argument is that ideology makes the social world seem natural and endowed with a self-evident truth-value. Ideology depends on a kind of transparent intelligibility that seems unmediated, that seems not to be constructed by relations, codes, conventions, signifying practices and strategies of representation. Social reality is simply there, a fact whose being is self-identical and unmediated, luminous and true, prior to all representation. Cultural representations, in the media or in clothing symbolism for example, are supposedly secondary appendages to our expressions of this pre-existent reality. Women are women, for example, prior to the clothing they wear; they have a natural self-identical being, characterised by passivity among other things, that exists prior to its expression or representation through clothing. Similarly, when the news media describes the United States as 'free', it is supposedly representing in language a pre-existing reality, whose truth is in no way dependent on such secondary representations as words.

Deconstruction suggests that the intelligible presence of being that ideology ascribes to social reality may itself be the product of strategies of representation. What supposedly comes second may in fact determine what is supposedly primary. Perhaps women would not be what they supposedly already are – passive social beings – if they were not represented in a certain way in our culture, if they did not adopt or wear certain symbolic representations that actively constitute them from a seemingly derivative, non-constituting position. Dresses make women feel vulnerable, after all, as chains make one weak. Similarly perhaps the oppressive economic structure of our society is dependent on legitimisation by such words as 'freedom' in order to continue in operation. Credit depends on credibility. If capitalism were regularly represented by the media as coercion or as a legal form of organised crime, it would cease to seem legitimate in the eyes of its victims. One operation of ideology, then, is to occlude the role representation plays in constructing social reality. Ideology promotes two assumptions: first, that there is a natural presence of being that is untouched by the conventions and institutions of representation and discourse (women are women, capitalism is freedom); and, second, that representation derives from and represents a pre-existing presence to which one gains cognitive access by passing through representations to the thing itself (for example, freedom is

a word that transparently represents or names a state of affairs in capitalist society; it has no constructive or legitimating function; it does not create a sense that bears no relation to reality).

What a deconstructive cultural criticism does is point out the way representations and discourses actively construct the social world, rather than merely representing it. And it analyses the way ideology makes the productive operations of representation and discourse seem to be merely passive reflections of a pre-existing reality. The major assumption here is that cultural representations are not simply accessories to economic, political and social power. In developed, post-absolutist societies the exercise of illegitimate power is itself dependent on culture, on the use of representations to make the world of oppression seem natural, endowing it with a self-identical being that seems impervious to change. One strand in the progress of civilisation has consisted of replacing the bayonet with the school system and the media.

Because of all this, the British Marxist cultural critics I mentioned speak often of the struggle in culture over how reality will be signified or represented. Whether a strike will be labelled by the media as a disturbance of national security or an expression of anger against oppression can make a great deal of difference to how events actually transpire. Whether a person is called a draft resister or evader implies a valuation that can influence the course of real events.

But representations and discourses can also play a more constitutive role, by forming equivalences, positing entities, influencing behaviour, transforming consciousness and mobilising desire. For example, representation plays such a role in the ideology of being. What seems to possess the force and truth of unmediated presence or natural being is often merely a representation which through constant repetition takes on the character of being or of nature. What we take to be nature is simply a prior representation at the tail end of a long series of previous representations. For example, anthropologists speak of pre-gender cultures in which specifically feminine enculturation, with its attendant set of representations, has not yet occurred.¹⁴ Yet because a cultural representation like a specifically feminine style of dress has been repeated uninterrupted for generations, it now assumes a natural value in our culture. What seems to be a natural endowment of being is in fact the effect of the imitation of previous representations. The radical importance of certain subcultures, like the beats, the hippies

and the punks, is that they recode cultural representations like dress and therefore undermine and demystify its apparent ontological or natural rootedness.

Deconstruction fits into a Marxist cultural criticism both as a method of criticism and as an affirmative programme. For an example of its critical importance I will look at the news media; the use of style in subcultures is an example of its affirmative application.

In a recent comparison of ABC and CBS news in one of my cultural studies courses, I found that people watching each one alone would have completely different senses of the reality of the day. A different world was constructed in each case by different strategies of representation.

ABC news, which is more pro-Republican than the others, began with a lead story on Reagan's defence budget. It was done using an heroic vocabulary; Reagan was depicted as holding fast against compromise, and the goodness of his inflexibility was emphasised by references by other Republicans to the Soviet threat; the weight of historical example was summoned through a mention of the Cuban missile crisis, although it had no bearing on budgetary questions. The second half of the story described the Democrats' alternative budget in negative terms. This alternative budget had Republicans screaming, and so only Republicans commented on it during the report. The lobbyists for the right-wing Chamber of Commerce were shown and described as 'fanning out' (a positive military metaphor) through Congress to do battle against the Democrats. CBS, in contrast, put this same story fourth. An anti-Reagan slant was evident. He was described as 'offended' by proposed defence cuts. And whereas ABC straightforwardly announced his upcoming speech on the subject, CBS worded it as 'an attempt to turn public opinion against the Democrats'. Rhetorical, and in consequence social, ellipsis was also at work in the news that evening. ABC did not mention that Nicaragua had just been invaded by right-wing counter-revolutionaries. Of course, if a pro-US fascist regime, like the one in neighbouring Guatemala, had been invaded by leftists, it no doubt would have been the lead story. Both networks covered a protest against a train carrying nuclear warheads. Both focused on the theatric and potentially violent aspects of the event and diminished its political dimension, just as the long shots from a helicopter camera made the demonstrators seem small and insignificant. ABC made sure to quote only

one demonstrator who said that he would be willing to risk his life for the security of the nation. An earlier report that day had shown a reporter getting one demonstrator to say that he did not care how much the demonstration cost the taxpayers to police it. No mention was made of how much the nuclear warheads were costing the taxpayers.

The selection and arrangement of representations thus paints a world through the news. The truthful presence of reality in the facticity turns out to be a construct, a signifying practice that transforms the raw material of events into representations with determinate values that determine how people think, feel and act. In addition, the news reveals to what extent reality itself is structured by representation. Reagan's budget is linked materially to real power relations, yet it must be represented in a certain way that occludes those power relations.

Deconstruction fits into a Marxist cultural criticism more affirmatively in regard to subcultural practices. Subcultures like the black hipsters of Harlem, the beats, the hippies and the punks develop symbolic styles of dress, speech and demeanour that set them apart from the dominant culture. Those practices constitute imaginary resolutions of real structural contradictions in our society – the ideal of freedom and success juxtaposed, for example, to the reality of the dead end of working-class youth life. Subcultural styles are frequently also political statements of resistance, especially in working-class cultures. Hyperbole in hipster dress and in beat imagery, and irony and parody in punk lyrics and demeanour – all take the dominant cultural norm and either exaggerate it to the point of ridicule or turn it against itself by decontextualising it and giving it a new meaning that subverts the original.

These affirmative and critical decontextualisations and rescriptings exemplify the deconstructive point that normative truth or meaning can always be ironised or parodied and that this possibility is inscribed as an opening in the apparent closure of self-sufficient meaning or truth, be it philosophical or cultural. That originary instability or constitutive dehiscence subverts claims to the absoluteness of cultural norms. The dominant culture is merely one more subculture, one that has the power to impose itself generally.

The dissemination, in the deconstructive sense, of subcultural practices opens productive possibilities for human creativity and points the way toward the uses of signs and representations to

reconstruct cultural life in non-normative and plural ways. If people can acquire different identities according to what representations or styles they adopt, then the liberal humanist norm of the self-identical individual self or cogito – with all of the moral, political, philosophic, juridical and economic principles that derive from it and that are so essential to the capitalist ethic of property and private will – loses its natural basis. If the drive to efficiency and the goal of accumulation can be displaced so easily by the deliberately inefficient and unprofitable play of subcultural everyday life practices, then those capitalist norms cease to seem natural and lose some of their ideological power. Everyday life, as William Morris dreamed but never quite dreamed enough, can become something more than an alternation of work and mass-consumed leisure. It can become style, the use of form and representation to change the matter and content of cultural life.

Deconstruction thus aids Marxist cultural criticism both as a critical tool and by offering principles that allow one to foresee certain emancipatory cultural possibilities in contemporary practices of representation. I would conclude, then, by suggesting that the deconstructive literary critical industry has only begun the work of pursuing the positive possibilities of post-structuralist philosophy. And although there are numerous grounds for debate and points of conflict between deconstruction and Marxism in the arena of orthodox literary criticism, the possibility exists that the two might work together fruitfully in political and cultural criticism.

Notes

1. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London, 1982). All the subsequent page references to this book are incorporated in the text.
2. 'Ou commence et ou finit un cours enseignant', in D. Grisoni, *Politiques de la philosophie* (Paris, 1976), as well as his texts in the Greph volume, *Qui a peur de la philosophie?* (Paris, 1977).
3. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* (Amherst, Mass., in press).
4. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago, Ill., 1982) preface.
5. Jacques Derrida, 'Living on Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Harold Bloom et al. (New York, 1979) p. 84.
6. Each is writing a doctoral dissertation, Crow at the University of Texas, Austin, and Yrchik at the State University of New York,

Binghamton. Crow, I should point out, was working on a deconstructive analysis of Hobbes's *Leviathan* as part of his dissertation long before I did the work that led to my remarks on Hobbes in the preface to my *Marxism and Deconstruction*. Although I had not read his work, my discussions with him greatly enabled my own thinking on the subject.

7. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Literary Criticism* (London, 1981) p. 168.
8. Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1982).
9. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1982).
10. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 109.
11. Thomas Spragens, Jr, *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago, Ill., 1981).
12. R. M. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York, 1975).
13. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn., 1979).
14. *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. S. Ortner and H. Whitehead (Cambridge, 1981).

7

Deconstructive Philosophy and Imaginal Psychology: Comparative Perspectives on Jacques Derrida and James Hillman

MICHAEL VANNOY ADAMS

In a real sense, the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida is a reaction to (or against) the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. At the very least, deconstruction is a departure from structuralism – or, perhaps more precisely, from the oppositional logic of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss asserts that the mind, whether ‘savage’ or ‘civilized’, categorises phenomena in oppositions. (Savage/civilised would be one such opposition, as would such classic oppositions as mind/body, subject/object, space/time, form/content and nature/culture.) The *phenomena* that the savage mind selects as relevant to categorise in oppositional terms may be different from those that the civilised mind regards as pertinent, but, according to Lévi-Strauss, this in no way implies that the *structure* of the civilised mind is qualitatively (that is, evolutionarily) either different from or superior to that of the savage mind. In contrast to Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who maintained that the savage mind was ‘pre-logical’ (although he did eventually repudiate the notion), Lévi-Strauss insists that the savage mind is just as logical as the civilised mind. In fact, he contends that the logic in both cases is identical – and it is a logic of oppositions (perhaps the most famous of which, at least in structural anthropology, is the ‘raw’ and the ‘cooked’).

The structuralist studies myths (and other texts). What interests him is not the contents (the mythemes, or gross constituent units

of a myth) as they happen to be narrated diachronically, but rather the form (the oppositional logic of the myth) as it may be schematised synchronically. In short, the structuralist is by definition a formalist. Thus he systematically extracts or abstracts the oppositions that inform or structure a myth, in order to represent diagrammatically the logic that governs the relations between and the transformations of these oppositions (for example, the transformation of the raw into the cooked or the savage into the civilised) – or at least that is what the structuralist supposes he does. The structuralist argues that these oppositions are implicitly present – objectively inherent, if tacitly so – in the text and, in addition, that they were in the savage mind that more or less unconsciously composed the myth. In *Structuralist Poetics* Jonathan Culler suggests that such oppositions may not be in the text – much less in the mind of any savage or, as the case may be, in the mind of any poet – but may merely be in the mind of the structuralist, who arbitrarily imputes these oppositions to the text – that is, imposes certain assumptions on the text: conventions, or heuristic devices, that enable him to study the text in one rather than another, perhaps equally valid way. If so, such ‘structures’ would simply be constructs, and the only justification for them would be pragmatic expedience.

As practised by Derrida in such inimitable style, deconstructive philosophy subjects to scrutiny certain metaphysical assumptions and value judgements that he asserts the West has accepted and applied uncritically in order to categorise phenomena. The very word ‘deconstruction’ epitomises the effort to subvert and transcend the logic of oppositions (for example, the opposition construction/destruction). In short, deconstruction is not a contradiction in terms but a pun with the logic of a paradox. According to Derrida, the West has categorised phenomena differentially or oppositionally, but it has not been content simply to differentiate one phenomenon from another and then to oppose one to the other. The West has also *privileged* one phenomenon *over* another. It has judged one to be more valuable than the other. It has considered one to be superior (primary and originary) and the other to be inferior (secondary and derivative) – or, as Derrida says, merely supplementary. Thus the logic of oppositions is the logic of the supplement.

In *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* Tzvetan Todorov demonstrates in practical terms what the deconstructive

'method', for lack of a better word, can accomplish. According to Todorov, the encounter between Europeans and native Americans (in this instance, between the Spaniards and the Indians) in the period immediately after the discovery of America in 1492 is a case with paradigmatic implications for all subsequent attempts by a 'self' to conquer and colonise an 'other'. Todorov provides a graphic representation of the logic of superiority and inferiority by which Sepúlveda at Valladolid in 1550 opposed the Spaniards to the Indians and privileged the self over the other:

Spaniards	=	adults (fathers)	=	men (husbands)	=	human beings
Indians	=	children (sons)	=	women (wives)	=	animals (monkey)

forbearance	=	moderation	=	soul	=	reason	=	good	=	superior
savagery	=	violence	=	body	=	appetite	=	evil	=	inferior

Although Todorov never once mentions the word 'deconstruction', in effect he deconstructs the oppositions conqueror/conquered and coloniser/colonised and exposes the metaphysical assumptions and logical (or ideological) biases that served Sepúlveda as convenient excuses in an effort to rationalise the subjugation of the Indians by the Spaniards. (In contrast to Derrida, however, Todorov does not imply that such invidious distinctions and intolerant practices are peculiar to the imperialistic West in the modern period. He admits that there are ample historical precedents for and parallels of this particular, although perhaps especially drastic example of discrimination.) As an alternative to the logic of oppositions, Todorov recommends a logic of differences that would adhere to the tenets of cultural relativism and, on the basis of impartial comparisons, result in 'nonviolent communication' rather than violent confrontation between the self and the other. He advocates an attitude that would neither assimilate the other as identical to the self, nor alienate the other as inferior to the self, but would simply appreciate (and respect) the other as different from yet equal to the self. Todorov acknowledges how difficult it is to realise this deconstructive ideal: 'To experience difference in equality is easier said than done.'¹

As Christopher Norris defines deconstruction, it is 'not simply a strategic reversal of categories'. It is an activity that 'seeks to undo both a given order of priorities and the very system of conceptual oppositions that makes that order possible'.² The objective is not

only to reverse the way the West has historically categorised certain phenomena but also to expose the way it has arbitrarily prioritised (or privileged) some phenomena over others and uncritically utilised oppositional logic as a means to that end. There is an affinity between the reversal of categories that Derrida advocates and the transvaluation of values that Nietzsche envisioned, as well as the revolution of classes that Marx prophesied. For example, Marx repudiates in no uncertain terms the ideological assumptions that he contends the capitalistic West has contrived to categorise certain phenomena – in this case, classes. But he does not just reverse the way the West, on the basis of the opposition greed/need, has historically privileged one class (the owners) over another class (the workers). Although he adopts the oppositional logic of class conflict and exploits it for rhetorical effect in the cause of revolution, he does so not in order simply to subordinate the owners to the workers. He realises that the reversal of categories or revolution of classes, is only a phase, although a necessary one, in the struggle to establish a classless society in which the concepts 'owners' and 'workers' would cease to have any significance (because the workers would be the owners of the means of production) – a society, that is, in which the oppositional logic of class conflict would no longer serve any conceivable purpose. Marx proposes not to replace one order of economic priorities with another (although he does tend to idealise the proletariat) but to displace the entire system of conceptual oppositions that validates the very existence of *any* order of economic priorities. (Whether a communistic West would merely be a totalitarian West, whether Marx is Utopian rather than scientific, is, of course, a serious consideration but quite another matter.)

Derrida says explicitly and emphatically that a reversal of categories is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition of any act of deconstruction.

I strongly and repeatedly insist on the necessity of the phase of reversal, which people have perhaps too swiftly attempted to discredit. . . . To neglect this phase of reversal is to forget that the structure of the opposition is one of conflict and subordination and thus to pass too swiftly, without gaining any purchase against the former opposition, to a *neutralization* which in *practice* leaves things in their former state and deprives one of any way of intervening effectively.³

In a gloss on this passage Culler cautions that to dispense with the phase of reversal and to indulge in the casual expression of equalitarian sentiments amount merely to a facile and naïvely ineffectual exercise: 'Affirmations of equality will not disrupt the hierarchy. Only if it includes an inversion or reversal does a deconstruction have a chance of dislocating the hierarchical structure.'⁴ To experience difference in equality – rather than superiority and inferiority in opposition – may be the ultimate objective of deconstruction, but immediately and complacently to affirm that one phenomenon is equal to another is a premature gesture that serves no practical purpose. The result of such a declaration is not to displace the previous state of affairs (or order of priorities) but to keep it in place – and not to obtain any real advantage. It is to neutralise every effort to intervene and effect a radical alteration or dislocation in the oppositional or hierarchical structure. Deconstruction is thus an attempt not simply to reverse certain categories but to displace, to dislocate, or to shift (if ever so slightly and slowly) a historical structure and the logical system that has served as a convenient excuse for it. Todorov formulates this article of deconstructive theory and practice in characteristically eloquent style:

I do not believe that history obeys a system, nor that its so-called laws permit deducing future or even present forms of society; but rather that to become conscious of the relativity (hence of the arbitrariness) of any feature of our culture is already to shift it a little, and that history (not the science but the subject) is nothing other than a series of such imperceptible shifts.⁵

According to Derrida, the West has employed oppositional (or conflictual) logic to privilege the spoken over the written, the serious over the frivolous, the factual over the fictional, the literal over the figural, the prosaic over the poetic, the referential over the reflexive, the masculine over the feminine, and so on and so forth. One term in the relation has had a positive, the other a negative, connotation. The West has regarded one term as primary and originitive, the other as secondary and derivative, and has relegated the latter (the subordinate or merely supplementary term) to a condition of dependence on the former. One term has been the host, as it were, the other the parasite. Among the oppositions that Derrida deconstructs perhaps the most important is the opposition

between the signified and signifier – that is, between the ‘concept’ and the ‘image’. (To define the signifier more or less exclusively as a sound-image, as Ferdinand de Saussure tends to do, is to adopt an untenably restrictive linguistic rather than a properly comprehensive semiotic perspective. There are just as many varieties of image as there are sensory media. As William Blake says, ‘Five windows light the cavern’d Man’. In addition to sound-images, there are sight-images, taste-images, touch-images, and smell-images – hence the preference for the word ‘image’, which does not privilege one sensory medium over another.) The reason the opposition signified/signifier is so important to Derrida is that it is precisely this opposition that has served as a logical (or epistemological) justification for all the other oppositions that the West has employed to categorise phenomena. Thus in order eventually to deconstruct these other oppositions, Derrida has initially to deconstruct the opposition signified/signifier. Derrida argues that the relation between the signified and the signifier, between the concept and the image, is an arbitrary (or conventional) one. There is no necessary connection, that is, between the signified and a signifier; the connection is a purely discretionary one. There is no objective, transcendently valid reason to relate a particular signifier to a particular signified and then to reduce the one to the other and declare that this signified, rather than that signified, is what the signifier ‘means’ in a specific case.

To reduce the signifier to a signified and declare that this is what the signifier means is to privilege the signified over the signifier. But Derrida insists that ‘every signified is also in the position of a signifier’.⁶ He thus paraphrases what Charles Sanders Peirce concluded or conceded: that the process of signification is an infinite regression. In the semiotic jargon that Peirce devised, the signifier is the ‘sign’, the signified the ‘interpretant’. Peirce says that the sign is a representation. It represents something to somebody ‘in some respect or capacity’. The sign ‘addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent, or perhaps a more developed sign’. (Why it might not create in the mind of that person a *less* developed sign Peirce does not say, although surely that is a possibility too.) ‘That sign which it creates’, Peirce says, ‘I call the *interpretant* of the first sign.’ Not only by definition but also in fact, the interpretant is a sign that someone employs to interpret another sign (the signified is a signifier that someone employs to interpret another signifier). But if every interpretant is a sign, if

every signified is (or occupies the position of) a signifier, then all that remains, in effect, is a series of signs or signifiers – one that regresses to infinity. Peirce acknowledges that the process of signification is logically illimitable (the only way to limit it is by an act of closure that arbitrarily arrests the process, and the only justification for such an act is purely pragmatic expedience): ‘So there is an infinite regression here. Finally the interpretant is nothing but another representation’ – that is, another sign – ‘and as a representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo! another infinite series.’

Culler attempts to deny, or at least to qualify, what this infinite regression logically entails. What it entails is that there is no interpretant (or signified) to which the series of signs (or signifiers) is ultimately reducible – that although there may be, in theory, a ‘final’ interpretant (as Peirce says), there is none in practice. Culler asserts that the infinite regression does not necessarily imply ‘indeterminacy of meaning in the usual sense: the impossibility or unjustifiability of choosing one meaning over another’. He contends that apparently unimpeachable criteria exist to determine what a signifier (or series of signifiers) means on a specific occasion, in a specific context, and he quotes Derrida in an effort to rebut the suggestion that no good reasons exist to relate a particular signifier to a particular signified:

On the contrary, it is only because there may be excellent reasons for choosing one meaning rather than another that there is any point in insisting that the meaning chosen is itself also a signifier that can be interpreted in turn. The fact that the signified is also in the position of signifier does not mean that there are no reasons to link a signifier with one signified rather than another; still less does it suggest, as both hostile and sympathetic critics have claimed, an absolute priority of the signifier. . . . ‘The “primacy” or “priority” of the signifier’, writes Derrida, ‘would be an absurd and untenable expression. . . . The signifier will never by rights precede the signified, since it would no longer be a signifier and the signifier “signifier” would have no possible signified.’⁷

There is, of course, no dearth of ‘reasons’ that someone may adduce to rationalise the relation of a signifier to a signified and the reduction of the one to the other (or the reduction of a series of

signifiers to a signified, the common denominator, as it were, by which all the signifiers are presumably divisible). But whether these are 'good' (much less 'excellent') reasons is quite another matter. By what criteria such reasons are good, bad or indifferent, Culler never says. In fact, to relate a signifier to one signified rather than another is, as Culler admits, a choice, and whether the reasons for the choice in a specific case are good or not is merely a matter of opinion. Every such choice is a value judgement that entails an exclusionary principle. To choose one signified rather than another and insist that this is what the signifier means is to judge certain criteria more valuable than others. To express such a preference is peremptorily to exclude or summarily to dismiss from consideration other criteria that, from another perspective, might appear to be equally valid and that might complicate or even contradict the choice. To try to deny the inexhaustibility (if not the indeterminacy) of signification and the relativity of all criteria is to commit a fallacy and to conduct a futile exercise.

Derrida does, as Culler indicates, say that to attribute priority to the signifier over the signified would be to assume a preposterous and indefensible position. That a signifier is a signifier only in relation to a signified – that is, in relation to what it signifies, or means – is an analytic proposition that is 'true' by virtue of the very definition of the word 'signifier'. But if the reversal of categories is, as Derrida also maintains, a necessary phase in the act of deconstruction, then a reversal of the order of priorities that has previously subordinated the signifier to the signified serves a vital purpose, although a strictly strategic one. A phase of reversal that would, for a change, privilege the signifier over the signified would provide an opportunity for reflection, for a reconsideration of just what constitutes the true nature of the relation between the signifier and the signified. It is in this sense and this sense only that it is unobjectionable to attribute priority to the signifier over the signified. That the signified is (or is also) a signifier implies that there exists, at least for the duration of the phase of reversal, a purely differential relation between signifiers in a series rather than a simple oppositional relation between the signified and the signifier. These are signifiers in a regressive series, signifiers that, as Derrida indicates by means of the nonce word *différance*, 'differ' one from another and infinitely 'defer' the choice of a transcendental signified that would limit the process of signification by an act of closure that would arbitrarily arrest the process – the choice, that

is, of a final interpretant that would interpret the series of signs in some ultimate sense, even (or especially) if this interpretant were one with polysemous implications. It is in this regard that Derrida proposes 'dissemination' as an alternative to the polysemy of interpretation. (The 'sem' in polysemy derives etymologically from *semeion*, or sign. In dissemination the 'sem' refers to semen, or seed – but, by means of an ingeniously spurious etymological derivation on the part of Derrida, it, too, alludes to *semeion*. Thus Derrida puns on the infinitely regressive dispersion of the sign or seed. In contrast to interpretation, which is a sterile product, dissemination is a fertile process, a proliferation of signs or seeds that regress to infinity – to a 'truth' that exists only at a purely hypothetical vanishing point where the parallel lines of signifier and signified presumably meet.) Derrida argues that there exists no signified that transcends the text (or series of signifiers), no signified that in imagination, intention or experience thematises or totalises what the text means, with the result that the text ceases to express or represent any polysemous truth. This is why he says, in the imperative, 'It is this hermeneutic concept of polysemy that must be replaced by dissemination.'⁸

Deconstructive philosophy has, as Culler observes, not only evoked a sympathetic response but also provoked a hostile reaction. Some critics have regarded it simply as an application of the indeterminacy or uncertainty principle to texts, while other critics have regarded it as the institutionalisation of an irresponsibility principle with insidiously nihilistic implications. In contrast to deconstructive philosophy, imaginal psychology has yet to excite much controversy (or much interest). Few critics know what imaginal psychology is, or, for that matter, who James Hillman, the principal proponent of imaginal psychology, is. Imaginal psychology is a depth psychology, a psychology of the unconscious. It derives from analytical (or archetypal) psychology but also departs from it, as well as from psychoanalysis. Formerly the Director of Studies at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, Hillman is the author of at least ten books, among the most important of which are *Re-Visioning Psychology* (which he delivered as the Terry Lectures at Yale University), *The Dream and the Underworld* and *The Myth of Analysis*; he is the editor of *Spring: An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*; he is the subject of an extensive interview with the aptly ironical title *Inter Views* and he is the author of a psychological commentary on Kundalini, an account by Gopi

Krishna of personal experiences with what Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe) called 'the serpent power'.

Although few critics yet realise it, there is a remarkable affinity between imaginal psychology and deconstructive philosophy, between Hillman and Derrida. (Hillman employs the term 'imaginal',⁹ in contrast to the word 'imaginary', which has the pejorative connotation of 'unreal'. In this, he follows Jung, who emphasised that the imagination is a 'psychic reality' more ontologically and existentially immediate than any physical reality.) It is not that Derrida has influenced Hillman – quite the contrary – but rather that Derrida and Hillman have reached similar conclusions by different and independent means. (Perhaps this is evidence that what they have to say has validity.) Hillman even says that he infers that 'destructuralizing'¹⁰ (by which he evidently means 'deconstructing') is an activity similar in purpose to what he means by 'revisioning': an effort to counteract the pervasive tendency to interpret the image, that is, to reduce it to a concept – to what it 'means' in hermeneutic terms. (In semiotic or deconstructive jargon, the image is, of course, the signifier and the concept, the signified.)

According to Hillman, interpretation, as both Freudian and Jungian analysts practise it, is invariably a reductionistic conceptualisation of the imagination. The interpretations that these analysts produce are utterly predictable scholastic exercises – a veritable monotony of concepts, with the result that images cease to astonish. Analysing, Hillman asserts, has degenerated into allegorising:

The use of allegory as a defense continues today in the interpretations of dreams and fantasies. When images no longer surprise us, when we can expect what they mean and know what they intend, it is because we have our 'symbolologies' of established meanings. Dreams have been yoked to the systems which interpret them; they belong to schools – there are 'Freudian dreams', 'Jungian dreams', etc. If long things are penises for Freudians, dark things are shadows for Jungians. Images are turned into predefined concepts such as passivity, power, sexuality, anxiety, femininity, much like the conventions of allegorical poetry.¹¹

Although both Freudian and Jungian analysts might object that

this is not an accurate characterisation but only a vulgar caricature, Hillman contends that formulaic interpretations are the rule rather than the exception. Freud devised the contextual method of 'free association' as an alternative to the cryptographic method of interpretation, which treated the dream as a message in cipher from the unconscious and sought to decode it by reference to a dictionary of typical (or even universal) symbols. Although Freud allowed that there are some typical symbols, he cautioned that an analyst should never presume that he knows what a dream means but should instead induce the dreamer to interpret the dream by means of free association. According to Freud, this was the only way to allay the suspicion that a specific interpretation was simply an arbitrary construction on the part of the analyst. To the extent that Freudians and Jungians allegorise rather than analyse, they violate this fundamental principle. What concerns Hillman, however, is not just that analysts resort to an actual dictionary of symbols; it is that they rely at all on concepts in order to interpret, or define, images. Even free association culminates in an interpretation, a translation of images into concepts – into what the dream 'really' means. As an alternative to free association, Jung proposed the comparative method of 'amplification'. But according to Hillman, amplification also tends to result in a reductionistic conceptualisation of the imagination. In short, interpretation (whether by free association or by amplification) is an attempt at demystification. Hillman insists that the dreamer should experience the image rather than reduce it to a concept – rather than demystify, interpret or translate it: 'For a dream image to work in life it must, like a mystery, be experienced as fully real. Interpretation arises when we have lost touch with the images, when their reality is derivative, so that this reality must be recovered through conceptual translation.'¹² (In deconstructive terms, analysts have, in effect, opposed the concept to the image and privileged the one over the other. They have regarded the concept as primary and originary, the image as secondary and, as Hillman says, derivative.)

Hillman would revision the oppositional logic that the iconoclastic West has habitually employed to categorise phenomena and reduce images to concepts. According to Hillman, 'oppositionalism' is pervasive – ineluctably so; under the circumstances, the only appropriate (in fact, the only possible) response is not to accept oppositions uncritically (or unconsciously) but to revision

them – that is, to displace, to dislocate or to shift them by an act of reflection:

This 'ism', like any other, is an ideological frame imposed upon life by our minds and is usually unconscious to our minds. . . .

We cannot move to another planet with another universe of discourse, or even to another cultural habit. Since we must remain where oppositionalism is in our very ground, the best we can do is enlighten ourselves about it . . . to shift oppositions, so that we may be less caught by them and more able to use them.¹³

Hillman mentions a number of oppositions that exert a subtle, even subliminal influence on analysts. Perhaps the most famous is the opposition ego/id, which Freud immortalised (or at least popularised) in the dictum, 'Where the id was, there shall the ego be.' Ironically this maxim is so memorable at least in part because Freud illustrated the concept with an image. The ultimate objective of analysis, he declared, is to reclaim land (the ego) from the *Zuider Zee* (the id). Freud thus privileged the ego over the id. In just this way, both Freudian and Jungian analysts have established an order of priorities that privileges the conscious over the unconscious, the rational over the irrational, the logical over the pathological, the normal over the abnormal. To Hillman, the most dubious value judgement of all is the one that privileges the conceptual over the imaginal.

An anecdote should suffice to illustrate the difference in attitude between Hillman and Jung (or, for that matter, between Hillman and Freud) in regard to images and concepts. In this instance, the image is a coiled black snake. Jung recounts the case of a patient, a young woman, twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, who once consulted him:

Her first words were when I had seated her, 'You know, doctor, I come to you because I have a snake in my abdomen.' 'What?' 'Yes, a snake, a black snake coiled up right in the bottom of my abdomen.' I must have made a rather bewildered face at her, for she said, 'You know, I don't mean it literally, but I should say it was a snake, a snake.' In our further conversation a little later – that was about the middle of her treatment which lasted only for ten consultations – she said she had foretold me, 'I'll come ten times, and then it will be all right.' 'But how do you know?' I

asked. 'Oh, I've got a hunch.' And really, about the fifth or sixth consultation she said, 'Oh, doctor, I must tell you, the snake has risen, it is now about here.' Hunch! Then on the tenth day I said, 'Now this is our last consultation. Do you feel cured?' And she said, beaming, 'You know, this morning it came up, it came out of my mouth, and the head was golden.' Those were her last words.¹⁴

Jung proceeds to interpret (in this case, to amplify by means of an ethnological parallel) this extraordinary image and to reduce it to an ordinary, if unfamiliar, concept. For Jung, the image of the coiled snake in the abdomen is a typical (or archetypal) symbol from the collective unconscious:

I told you the case of that intuitive girl who suddenly came out with the statement that she had a black snake in her body. Well now, that is a collective symbol. That is not an individual fantasy, it is a collective fantasy. It is well known in India. She had nothing to do with India, but though it is entirely unknown to us we have it too, for we are all similarly human. So I even thought in the first moment that perhaps she was crazy, but she was only highly intuitive. In India the serpent is at the basis of a whole philosophical system, of Tantrism; it is Kundalini, the Kundalini serpent. This is something known only to a few specialists, generally it is not known that we have a serpent in the abdomen. That is a collective dream or collective fantasy.¹⁵

In Kundalini yoga the snake in the abdomen rises up the spine through successive *cakras* until it finally emerges above the top of the head as the lotus with a thousand petals. That the snake in the abdomen of the young woman emerges from the mouth does not complicate matters for Jung. He argues that the young woman had an innate, intuitive knowledge of an ancient system of philosophy (or technique of meditation), and on that basis he reduces the image to a concept: the serpent power. (For Freud, the image of a coiled snake in the abdomen of a young woman would probably have been a symbol of repressed sexuality.)

According to Hillman, whether the image is a coiled snake in the abdomen or a coiled snake in the corner, to reduce the image to a concept is to allegorise, not analyse:

We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts. The coiled snake in the corner cannot be translated into my fear, my sexuality, or my mother-complex without killing the snake. . . . Interpretations and even amplifications of images, including the whole analytical kit of symbolic dictionaries and ethnological parallels, too often become instruments of allegory. Rather than vivifying the imagination by connecting our conceptual intellects with the images of dreams and fantasies, they exchange the image for a commentary on it or a digest of it.¹⁶

To interpret what the image means, Hillman says, is to misconstrue the purpose of analysis:

For instance, a black snake comes in a dream, a great big black snake, and you can spend a whole hour with this black snake talking about the devouring mother, talking about the anxiety, talking about the repressed sexuality, talking about the natural mind, all those interpretative moves that people make, and what is left, what is vitally important, is what that snake is doing, this crawling huge black snake . . . and the moment you've defined the snake, interpreted it, you've lost the snake, you've stopped it, and then the person leaves the hour with a concept about my repressed sexuality or my cold black passions or my mother or whatever it is, and you've lost the snake. The task of analysis is to keep the snake there, the black snake, and there are various ways for keeping the black snake . . . see, the black snake's no longer necessary the moment it's been interpreted, and you don't need your dreams any more because they've been interpreted.

But I think you need them all the time, you need that very image you had during the night.¹⁷

The reason why it is so important to keep the image is 'because that image keeps you in an imaginative possibility'. To lose the image, to reduce it to a concept that is a foregone conclusion – for example, 'my guilt complex' – is to interpret the image in terms of 'your ego system of what you know, your guilt', with the result that the dreamer now has an easy conscience because he presumes to know just what the image means. 'You've absorbed the un-

known into the known (made the unconscious conscious)', Hillman says, 'and nothing, absolutely nothing has happened, nothing.' For Hillman, the image is always more important than any concept: 'I mean *The image is always more inclusive, more complex* (it's a complex, isn't it?) *than the concept*. Let's make that a rule. That's why "stick to the image" is another rule.'¹⁸

It was a great discovery, Hillman readily acknowledges, suddenly to realise, as Freud and Jung did, just how profound in implication the images in dreams and fantasies are. But then to attempt to ascertain only what these images might mean, as if the interpretation of dreams and fantasies were the sole reason for the very existence of these images, appears in retrospect, Hillman argues, to have been a questionable objective, a too restrictive one:

We have, since Freud, since 1900, this great *Traumdeutung*, where he said, 'My goodness, look at the dreams!' The dreams – all these images in your dreams are significant, tremendously significant. And then Jung said, 'All those images going on in psychotics are tremendously significant. The fantasies, the dreams, the images are going on forever in the collective unconsciousness. They're the background of art, they're the background of madness, they're the background of thought, the background of childhood thinking, the background of ritual . . . it's everywhere. The image, the imagination, is fundamental.'

But then what they actually did was to make a move that we no longer want to do. Their move, that they both made, was to translate the images into crystallized symbolic meanings. That is, they took whatever they saw and didn't leave it where it was, but moved it into 'this *means* that'. I don't want to go into the details of their systems of translation. Put it another way – they brought up the material and then by the translation sent it back down again. Once you've translated the dream into your Oedipal situation or your omnipotence fantasy or your penis-envy or you've translated the big black snake into the mother, the Great Mother, you no longer need the image, and you let the image only say one thing, one word: Great Mother. Then it disappears. You don't want that black snake really any more. You want to work on your mother complex, change your personality and so on. . . . As somebody said about Jung, his whole myth was the myth of meaning. Now let's leave meaning, and the search for meaning, and the meaning of life.¹⁹

Freud and Jung could not leave the image well enough alone. They could not resist the urge to interpret it symbolically – that is, conceptually. In contrast, when Hillman insists that the image is more inclusive, more complex, than the concept, he emphasises the particularity of the concrete image over the generality of any abstract concept. Interpretation is thus simplification, an exclusion of those imaginative possibilities that Hillman says are so much more important to the dreamer than any conceptual reduction. Rather than rely complacently on an interpretation that regards the image as a symbol and reduces it to a concept – to what it means – Hillman suggests that the dreamer should stick to the image, adhere to the ‘precise presentation’²⁰ of the image. Rather than immediately resort to a hermeneutic paraphrase of the image, the dreamer should attend to the phenomenological nuances, the unique sensuous qualities and activities, of the big black snake, reflect on them, and perhaps even elaborate on them (by means, for example, of the method of active imagination).

As an alternative to allegorising, Hillman proposes ‘analogising’. He defines analogy as ‘likeness in *function* but not in *origin*’. For example, the big black snake coiled in the abdomen or in the corner may be like a snake in the grass, a snake in the basket, a snake on the tree or a snake on the cross; it may be like a sleeping, dreaming snake or a waking, rising snake; it may be like a rattling, striking snake; it may be like a ‘cunning’, ‘poised’ snake (that is, a punning snake); it may be like a charmed serpent, a bruised serpent, a brazen serpent, a plumed serpent; it may be like the snakes of Medusa, of Laocoön, of Krishna, of Siva, of Clytemnestra, of Antony and Cleopatra, of Adam and Eve, of Aaron and Pharaoh, of Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz and the benzene ring or Thomas Pynchon and the rainbow rocket; it may be like Quetzalcoatl, like Uroboros, or like Kundalini. It may have a function similar to any or all of these and other snakes (or, for that matter, to none of them), but a similar function does not, by any means, imply the same origin. ‘Analogies’, Hillman asserts, ‘keep us in the functional operation of the image, in the patterns of similarities, without positing a common origin for these similarities.’ To posit such an origin is to allegorise rather than analogise: to regard the big black snake as a symbol, to reduce the image to a concept such as evil, sin, death, sex, birth, life, power and so on. ‘The operative term is “like”’, Hillman says. ‘This is like that.’²¹ (Not, as Freud and Jung said, this *means* that.)

Appropriately enough, Hillman describes what analogising is like by means of an analogy:

Analogizing is like my fantasy of Zen, where the dream is the teacher. Each time you say what an image means you get your face slapped. The dream becomes a Koan when we approach it by means of analogy. If you . . . 'interpret' a dream, you are off the track, lost your Koan. (For the dream is the thing, not what it means.)

Then you must be slapped to bring you back to the image. A good dream analysis is one in which one gets more and more slaps, more and more analogies, the dream exposing your entire unconsciousness, the basic matters of your psychic life.²²

Hillman argues that the dreamer should submit to (and reflect on) an infinitely regressive number of slaps, analogies and images – the more, the better – since the only alternative is an allegory, a concept:

So the infinite regress should not bother us; it occurs even in empiricism when one tries to follow a sequence of ideas back to their 'origin' in an observation of a 'hard fact'. Psychologizing by means of the infinite regress is also regressing toward the infinite, the God within. Each step in the process yields insight. It is like peeling the mystic's onion, but here not for the sake of an esoteric void at the core but for the sake of the perpetual movement inward.²³

Whether the dream is more like a Koan or an onion, it is apparently an inexhaustible source of imaginative possibilities – if the dreamer and the analyst allow as much and respond to it with the proper sensitivity. If, however, they reduce a series of images to a concept, a series of analogies to an allegory, a series of similar functions to a common origin, they arbitrarily limit these possibilities.

Hillman does not propose to eliminate all concepts, even if that were possible. He admits that conceptual language, like oppositional logic, is a permanent fixture, a necessary feature, of contemporary discourse – although it is also, he cautions, one of the hooks and snares of the ego:

Sure, I think in concept. . . . We're modern civilized people, we need our concepts. Of course, I don't mean throw out all conceptual language, but, generally speaking, conceptual language is where we're caught, where we are in the ego, where things are dead, where we go back to what is already made and finished and where the images can't reach us.²⁴

What concerns Hillman is the assumption on the part of ego psychology (which is a conceptual rather than an imaginal psychology) that it is not only possible but also desirable, at every opportunity, to substitute concepts for images. (According to Hillman, to the extent that Freudian and Jungian analysts produce interpretations, they are all psychologists in the service of the ego – whether they realise it or not.) To conceptualise the image in this way is not to analyse, Hillman argues, but to allegorise: to obliterate all traces of the concrete phenomenological particularity of the image. Thus Hillman contends that conceptual psychology can result in *coagulation*, 'so that before we know it we are strangled in a new typology – Gods and Goddesses as stereotypical models on a tight network for placing everything'. But he also expresses an equally serious reservation about imaginal psychology. He concedes that it can result in *dissolution*, 'so that all we do is move words around in an existential vacuum, anything as good as everything else in endless widespread analogies'.²⁵ Although Hillman privileges the image over the concept (and employs polemical rhetoric in the process), perhaps this is only a phase of reversal, a strategy necessary to counteract the iconoclastic tendencies of analysts and to revision psychology imaginally: to remind analysts (who have forgotten or repressed the fact) that the concept needs the image just as much – or more – than the image needs the concept.

Derrida and Hillman would reverse the logic of oppositions and the order of priorities that have privileged the signified over the signifier, the concept over the image. They would substitute dissemination or phenomenology for hermeneutics. This is not to say that there are no differences between Derrida and Hillman. But the differences are perhaps more semantic than theoretical or practical. For example, Derrida rejects the term 'polysemy', while Hillman retains it. Hillman privileges the image over the concept because it implies multiple – or, he says, polysemous – imaginative possibilities.²⁶ If, as he seems to do, Hillman means a regressively

infinite, logically indeterminate (in the strict sense of indeterminacy rather than merely what Freud meant by 'overdetermination') number of such possibilities, then this difference between Derrida and Hillman is more apparent than real. Deconstructive philosophy and imaginal psychology are not reducible, the one to the other. But what Hillman would do for psychology is remarkably similar to (if not quite the same as) what Derrida would do for philosophy. What Derrida would deconstruct, Hillman would revision, imaginably.

Notes

1. *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1984) pp. 153, 182 and 249.
2. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York, 1982) p. 31.
3. Jonathan Culler quotes this passage from *Positions* in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982) pp. 156–66. Culler notes that for some inexplicable reason the English translation of the French edition of *Positions* omits the first sentence of this passage.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
5. *The Conquest of America*, p. 254.
6. Culler quotes this passage in *On Deconstruction*, p. 188.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
8. *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, Ill., 1981) p. 262.
9. Hillman derives the term 'imaginal' from Henri Corbin. See Corbin 'Mundus Imaginalis: or the Imaginary and the Imaginal', *Spring* (1972) pp. 1–19.
10. *Inter Views* (New York, 1983) p. 57.
11. *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York, 1977) p. 8. According to Hillman, the interest in symbology on the part of both Freudian and Jungian analysts is in an excessive, even obsessive, preoccupation: 'When I am asked, as it often happens in the discussion following a lecture, "Why don't you speak of symbols?" . . . I usually reply with a confession: I come from Zurich; for the past quarter-century I have lived in a world of symbols. They no longer hold my attention. Everyone in Zurich speaks of symbols, looks them up, writes theses on them . . . and I too have worked on them. This is because it is said by the Zurich school that one cannot understand psychic materials, dreams especially, without a knowledge of symbols.' The concern with symbology is not, as Hillman observes, a vice peculiar to the Zurich school; it is also a shibboleth of the Vienna school – as proof he quotes the passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* where Freud insists that a knowledge of symbols is a necessary supplement to the

method of free association ('An Inquiry into Image', *Spring*, 1977, p. 62). It is Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother* who perpetrates what is perhaps the most egregiously reductionistic unintentional parody of the symbolological method. In *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York, 1979), Hillman notes that for Neumann virtually every 'female figure and image become "symbols" of the "Great Mother"'. Hillman comments: 'If one's research shows results of this kind, i.e. where all data indicate one dominant hypothesis, then it is time to ask a psychological question about the hypothesis' (p. 216 n.).

12. *The Dream and the Underworld*, p. 123.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5. 'The logic of oppositions and all their kinds (contradictories, contraries, polarities, complementaries), whether the opposites are formal only or material as well, and then whether the pair of terms together are exhaustive, all this, as well as the meta-physical structure of dualism that seems both to require and imply oppositional logic', Hillman says, is a vast subject but one with special relevance for depth psychology, which was 'conceived by Freud and even more by Jung in terms of opposites' (p. 75).
14. C. G. Jung *Speaking*, ed. William McGuire and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J., 1977) pp. 309–10.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 322–3.
16. *Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 39.
17. *Inter Views*, pp. 53–4.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
20. 'An Inquiry into Image', p. 68.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
23. *Re-Visioning Psychology*, pp. 153–4.
24. *Inter Views*, pp. 56–67.
25. 'An Inquiry into Image', p. 85.
26. See 'Further Notes on Images', *Spring* (1978) pp. 152–82. For more on polysemy in imaginal psychology, see Paul Kugler, *The Alchemy of Discourse: An Archetypal Approach to Language* (Lewisburg, Penn., 1982) pp. 89–95 and 109–12.

8

Deconstruction and American Poetry: Williams and Stevens

RAJEEV PATKE

First, the matter of a definition: what exactly are we to understand by the word 'deconstruction'? In practice, deconstruction is exemplified primarily in the critical readings made by the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida, of a series of texts in the history of Western philosophy, from Plato to Descartes, Rousseau and Hegel to Husserl and Heidegger, and of a series of more recent texts in the history of structuralism and post-structuralism, from Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Foucault.

Derrida's own manner of reading texts and his style have scarcely remained fixed enough for his disciples quite to make a practicable method or for us to extract a conveniently rigid definition out of them. As a substitute, I offer a brief set of quotations from works from different periods of Derrida's accompanied by comments by his exegetes.

Taking as an example Derrida's analysis of Husserl, Jonathan Culler describes this as 'what we now call a "deconstruction" of Husserl's text: a demonstration that the logic of Husserl's argument "undoes" itself and thus involves a central paradox or self-contradiction which is a basic insight into the matter under discussion'. Later, Culler expands on his description:

Deconstruction thus undertakes a double reading, describing the ways in which lines of argument in the texts it is analysing call their premises into question, and using the system of concepts within which a text works to produce constructs, such as difference and supplement, which challenge the consistency of that system.¹

Josue Harari picks on Derrida's analogy between deconstruction and desedimentation (from *Of Grammatology*) to explain deconstruction

as the tracing of a path among textual strata in order to stir up and expose forgotten and dormant sediments of meaning which have accumulated and settled into the text's fabric. . . . Thus, deconstruction is really . . . a technique of de-sedimenting the text in order to allow what was always already inscribed in its texture to resurface.²

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes: 'Reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the author, between what he commands and what he does not command of the schemata of the language that he uses.'³ On this Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments:

The deconstructive reader exposes the grammatological structure of the text by locating the moment in the text which harbours the unbalancing of the equation, the sleight of hand at the limit of a text which cannot be dismissed as a contradiction.⁴

Later, in 1972 (in *Marges de la Philosophie*), Derrida writes: 'the task is . . . to dismantle the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work (in the text), not in order to reject or discard them, but to inscribe them in another way'.⁵ Spivak amplifies on this as follows:

If in the process of deciphering a text in the traditional way we come across a word that seems to harbour an unresolvable contradiction, and by virtue of being one word is made sometimes to work in one way and sometimes in another and thus is made to point away from the absence of a unified meaning, we shall catch at that word. If a metaphor seems to suppress its implications, we shall catch at that metaphor. We shall follow its adventures through the text and see the text come undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its selftransgression, its undecidability. It must be emphasized that I am not speaking simply of locating a moment of ambiguity or irony ultimately incorporated into the text's system of unified meaning but rather

a moment that genuinely threatens to collapse that system . . . [T]he relationship between the reinscribed text and the so-called original text is not that of patency and latency, but rather the relationship between two palimpsests. The 'original' text itself is that palimpsest on so-called 'pre'-texts that the critic might or might not be able to disclose and any original inscription would still only be a trace: 'Reading then resembles those x-ray pictures which discover, under the epidermis of the last painting, another hidden picture: of the same painter or another painter, no matter, who would himself, for want of materials, or for a new effect, use the substance of an ancient canvas or conserve the fragment of a first sketch.'⁶

Through the various metaphors of dismantling or desedimenting, of picking on contradictions and paradoxes, or bringing suppressed or concealed details of an argument or a metaphor to the surface, of palimpsests and X-rays, we realise, in summary conclusion, that deconstruction is an insight into the blindness of an author's text, what Paul de Man describes as: 'to bring to light what had remained unperceived by the author and his followers';⁷ or what Derrida describes as 'to show the text "what it does not know"'.⁸ Deconstruction opens out the meaning of a text from its place of supposed certitude and fixity (a certitude which traditional forms of interpretation hope to approximate), into the status of interpretation, into what Derrida has called a 'freeplay' of meaning.

This crucial notion of 'freeplay' occurs in what was Derrida's first appearance in English, an essay presented at a symposium on structuralism at the Johns Hopkins University. It was also his most influential piece of writing throughout the 1970s for his American readers and disciples. In this essay, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences', Derrida takes up for examination the fundamental metaphor for structure, a circle, which defines its organisation and shape in terms of its relation to its centre. This is, for Derrida, 'the concept of the centered structure'.⁹

The whole history of the concept of structure', Derrida writes, 'must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center . . . successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics,

like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix . . . is the determination of being as *presence* in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence.¹⁰

What the Derridean enterprise of deconstruction really seeks to dismantle, or question, or put in doubt, by the technique of demonstrating textual concealments, or suppressions, or contradictions, is the affirmative, humanistic ontology of presence (and of all its metaphors); and, according to Derrida, 'the metaphysics of presence is attacked with the help of the concept of the *sign*'.¹¹

In this Derridean destruction of Western metaphysics, borrowing a set of binary distinctions from Saussurean linguistics, we are to think of language as a system of signs, and of the relation between language and reality as a relation between a set of signifiers and a corresponding set of signifieds. A signifier, within language, refers and corresponds to a signified outside of language. But the two – signifier and signified – are not the same; they are separated by a difference which the humanistic tradition tries to forget. Thus, for instance, God and the word 'God' are different in that the word is an arbitrary set of sounds or signs which refers and defers to the concept which it signifies, the concept of deity, which is contained within the word 'God' but prior to the word itself, and, in a sense, independent of it.

Now, if, as within a Nietzschean perspective, we are given to suspecting that God or the gods are nothing other than human suppositions, inventions from an ontology of presence we can no longer believe in – if, in other words, the gods have fled, or dissolved, or died, we are left with a defunct signifier with nothing for it to refer or defer to. In this predicament, according to Derrida, the system of signs that is language has to throw its signifiers of presence (and of all metaphors of presence) into a kind of perpetual freeplay of substitutions for the absent signified. In other words, 'Freeplay is the disruption of presence',¹² where language tries to cover up for the absence of the transcendental signified with its own fictive presences. This absence of a transcendental presence, according to Derrida, if looked at from the 'thematic of broken immediateness, is thus the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay of which the Nietz-

schean affirmation – the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation – would be the other side'.¹³

Thus deconstruction is affirmative if we emphasise (with Derrida) the Nietzschean sense of celebrating freeplay without exhibiting a nostalgia for a fixed centre of belief and value, or a transcendental signified, or a secure origin, or a full and reassuring presence. But from the perspective of a humanism, which has throughout the history of the West 'dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game',¹⁴ deconstruction is a negative anti-theology or a poetics of absence, a nihilistic celebration of the freeplay of meaning in life (and in language as language reflects the meanings we find in life); it is a form of reduction which reduces the status of a text to that of an interpretation, on a palimpsest of such interpretations, each no more or less valid than any other, a succession of 'pre-texts' which covers up the matter of an 'original' text, a centre which has always already been decentred.

Thus far I have tried to put together some notion of what deconstruction is about, within the context of some of its larger intentions. But our present concern is less Derrida or the theory of deconstruction, than the application of this theory to the business of literary criticism and, specifically, to the business of the interpretation of poetry. Every critical act presupposes a theory. The American varieties of deconstruction would appear to have altogether more theory than practice to them, which is particularly odd in view of the anti-theoretical stance of its principal practitioner, Derrida, who sets himself up as a dismantler of other people's theoretical structures and of the premises on which these are founded, rather than as the creator of a theory or even of a generally applicable method.

The justification for an interest in any critical theory must depend on the insights it has to offer in practical application. Therefore I propose to present examples of deconstructive criticism as it applies itself to the reading of American poetry. We shall briefly look at readings of two modern poets, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens; the readings are largely derived from a single critic, a disciple of Derrida, the better to examine the singular language of criticism as it applies itself to the several and distinct languages of poetry to be found in Williams and Stevens.

The critic I would particularly have us keep in mind is Joseph N.

Riddel, not – I hasten to add – because I intend him to be regarded as the foremost American deconstructionist (a claim that could be argued between Riddel and Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and perhaps Paul de Man), but because he is the most articulate among American critics in his systematic application of the Derridean vocabulary to the reinterpretation of modern American poetry. Riddel's case is of particular interest in that he began his critical career with a widely acclaimed book on Stevens which antedates and is therefore innocent of deconstruction. J. Hillis Miller is another such convert who has changed critical direction in mid-career, but he lends himself less readily to our present purposes in having more theory than practice to his deconstruction, and in writing in a style marginally less accessible than Riddel's.

Perhaps this might be the proper place for an observation about the styles of deconstructive critics. They all seem to follow the bad example set by Derrida (and indeed by his very idea of the literary text as a kind of interpretation, and, as such, no more privileged in its language than the language of the critic). Derrida's styles have progressed from density and opacity to an eccentric liveliness inclusive of puns, hyphenations, etymologies, allusions, private jokes, tongue-in-cheek mockery and much else besides, which subverts the very function of communication that we suppose the critic to be committed to. Hartman, in English, almost outdoes the later Derrida in this stylistic aspect, a form of indulgence enjoyed to a greater or lesser degree, as their gifts will permit, by all deconstructionists. The vice is so contagious as to occasionally affect even the reviewer and detractor of deconstruction.

Turning to the poems at hand, I take them to illustrate some of the primary qualities and concerns which link the otherwise different poetries of Williams and Stevens. By making the poems elicit these concerns I hope to arrive at a description of the kinds of poetry they represent. I then hope to demonstrate that this kind of poetry is the most susceptible to deconstruction in the sense that it seems to be practising deconstruction itself. Poetries like those of Williams and Stevens attract the deconstructionist because they appear to anticipate in poetic terms the critical vocabulary of the deconstructionist, and because they appear in themselves to be acts of self-deconstruction, where we understand self-deconstruction to mean, in Culler's words, an operation 'in which the text unmask its own construction, reveals it as a rhetorical operation rather than a solid foundation'.¹⁵ I further hope to

demonstrate that such poetries lend themselves so readily to deconstructionist designs because they are, in a fundamental sense, Heideggerian, or what Derrida might call Rousseauist. I do not of course mean by this that Williams and Stevens were necessarily aware that they were modelling their concerns on the example of Heidegger. What I do mean is that their poetry is of a kind with that discovered by Heidegger in the works of the German poets Hölderlin and Rilke, and described in a vocabulary and as part of a philosophical attitude to life, language and experience, which are in themselves one of the major sources from which deconstructionist theory originates. Deconstruction, however, ends up taking a basic position antithetical to the Heideggerian one, which expresses a nostalgia for origins, and pursues the recovery of a lost sense of meaningful being.

To ask the question whether poetries unlike those of Williams and Stevens, whether poems which are not Heideggerian, are also suited to deconstruction would take us beyond the scope of my present purposes. However, what is within my scope is to make it possible or at least easier to decide whether deconstruction does indeed offer insights into the poems at hand, insights into their nature and function which would be lost or unavailable without its theory and vocabulary. Only if we are convinced that deconstruction works within the Heideggerian poem are we likely to be interested in finding out if it works with other kinds of poetry. If we are unconvinced of its utility even with Williams and Stevens, we should then be justified in dismissing deconstruction as a critical enterprise within philosophy and structuralism, practised as such by Derrida, and forcibly and ill-advisedly misapplied by his American disciples to the altogether different structures of the privileged language of poetry.

Looking at the poems, we note, at the very outset, that Williams and Stevens were in the habit of granting their poems dual identities. They often incorporated as parts of sequences poems which would also be allowed to stand by themselves, in an independent light. For instance, 'The Descent' is part of the third section of Book II of *Paterson*; and it also appears by itself (and not as an extract) in the volume *Pictures from Brueghel & Other Poems*, and elsewhere. The matter could be illustrated at greater length and from both poets, but the point I wish to emphasise here is that the blurring of the individual identity of poetic utterance, where parts are wholes

in themselves and wholes are aggregated out of smaller, independent wholes, can only end up obfuscating the very notion of a single unified structure, based on an organic metaphor of the mutually dependent interrelatedness of parts to each other and to the whole they constitute.

This provides an opening for the thin end of the deconstructive wedge. Far from the poet treating the body of his own poems as inviolate and sacrosanct, we see him permitting his utterances parallel and double existence. The issue is neatly illustrated in Riddel's review of a book on Stevens's longer poems by Helen Vendler: the deconstructionist reviewer confronts the New Critic. Vendler tries to rescue the notion of an organically unified structure for Stevens's long poems in the teeth, as it were, of Stevens's practice of reordering the constituent sections of a long poem into different sequences by changing the order of the sections as well as by the omission of sections, thus creating two or more virtually distinct and different poems, all bearing the same title. Riddel notes:

What Mrs Vendler demands even of a long poem, in so far as it can be called a poem (autonomous and auto/telic) is that it 'will survive a possible deliquescence into component parts'. That is, she is engaged in the very difficult task of trying to discover in Stevens, whom she considers a direct heir of the Romantics, the internal coherence demanded by a contextualist theory of value, even while recognising that the dialectical structure of the Romantic vision has been accommodated by New-Critical orthodoxy only by bringing it through the back door – as Richards said he did with Coleridge, the materialist accommodating the idealist.¹⁶

Paul de Man has the same criticism to make of the New Critics when he finds that they 'pragmatically entered in the hermeneutic circle of interpretation, mistaking it for the organic circularity of natural process'.¹⁷

'The Descent', in being allowed to stand by itself, questions the subservient role played by its counterpart in *Paterson*; and the set of lines from *Paterson*, in being part of a larger whole, question the capability of 'The Descent' to be meaningful by itself. Where the New Critic is likely to find this dual existence mutually vitiating,

the deconstructionist discovers a pluralism of meaning to confirm his theory of textual freeplay, a willingness in one text to confess to a double which questions its own uniqueness.

At any rate, in *Paterson* Williams set himself the objective of finding 'an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me' ('Author's Note'). His starting point is the composite image of a city, Paterson (New Jersey), an adjoining mountain and a river (the Passaic) which flows through the city. This image merges and interpenetrates with that of a man, Paterson, both poet and everyman, a woman and the poet's thoughts as they race forward in a journey which is soon troubled by the sense of a lack of direction. The journey of 'The Descent', when placed in the context of Paterson's realisation that 'Divorce is the sign of knowledge in our times' reads as a poem about the retrieval of a sense of direction; a poem which falls back upon memory to renew a sense of purpose, and on forgetfulness to give its beginning again a sense of newness. The 'Preface' to *Paterson* says:

It is the ignorant sun
 rising in the slot of
 hollow suns risen, so that never in this
 world will a man live well in his body
 save dying – and not know himself
 dying; yet that is
 the design. Renews himself
 thereby, in addition and subtraction

The evening sun casting shadows in 'The Descent' is like all these hollow suns which have risen and set in a mechanical repetitiveness which deadens. Independent of its context in *Paterson*, 'The Descent' creates a more generalised sense of despair, which casts a shadow over any sort of journey or quest, whether a descent into the self or into human history, whether into the past or into the future, whether the quest is seen in space or in time.

One specific sense in which the poet could be said to make a descent is in his search for a new or renewed form of language. In *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958) Williams quotes 'The Descent' with special affection because with it he had made a new formal and rhythmic beginning, abandoning the false freedom of free verse for what he then describes as the concept of 'the variable foot'.¹⁸

'The Descent' approaches the idea of a beginning as burdened by

memory and its accomplishments. Every attempt at a new beginning is aware of all previous such attempts which make a mockery of the very notion of a truly new beginning. A truly new beginning would have to be free of the burden of time, its memories of past beginnings would have to be expunged, and a sense of priority and firstness substituted in the place of what a critic like Harold Bloom would call the poet's sense of belatedness, his anxiety of influence.

But slightly more than halfway through the poem (by lines 30-2), as the sun sets and night wakens, instead of being plunged into despair the poet revives with a sense of freshness. Overturning the conventional figurative association between darkness and despair, between light and hope, the poem has managed to equate night with forgetting and white with the memory of beginnings. Thus the shadows cast by the sun are different from the shadow cast by the absence of the sun, night, in that the latter expunges memory, and thus, as night wakens, the poet made ignorant by his loss of memory can rise again to the hope of a truly new beginning.

In delineating the continuity of American poetry Roy Harvey Pearce has described the quintessential position of the American Adamic poet as one overwhelmed by nostalgia for a return to the beginning, to the Garden of Eden before the Fall, before time itself, and its attendant change, decay and divorce began. As part of this Adamic tradition 'The Descent' is, in the broadest sense, a post-lapsarian poem, guilty of wanting to be innocent and ignorant again, intent on believing that it could travel back (or forward) into a world where it can recover the originary or aboriginal source of being. It could be apparent by now how the theme of the poem treads a path which the deconstructionist would make peculiarly his own. In particular, we should note how the poem depends on a sleight-of-hand trick. A journey which remembers and therefore repeats past journeys can never really undo time and become the first journey itself, except by invoking the power to forget. Thus an overwhelming need to believe that it can forget must warp the rhetoric and figurations of the poem into the illusory semblance of forgetting, the coming on of night in the poem equated symbolically with the onset of the wished-for amnesia.

Consider how Heidegger, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1958) presents his version of 'The Descent' theme: 'But we do not repeat a beginning by reducing it to something past and now known, which need merely be imitated; no, the beginning must be begun again, more radically, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity

ity that attend a true beginning.'¹⁹ He adds: 'Since it is a beginning, the beginning must in a sense leave itself behind.'²⁰ In this context we realise of Williams's poem the circular, or rather the spiralling movement which places its search in the paradoxical or self-contradictory position of making a wholly new beginning and of reaching back to an origin which was once, at the beginning of time, *the* beginning. If, in Heideggerian terms, we translate beginning into beginning to be or, in short, into being, the project of the poem equates a new sense of being with the original source of being. Thus the poem maintains a kind of double-focus between its sense of loss and its incipience of hope, between reaching back and reaching forward. The conclusion of the poem wills memory out of existence, and to that extent, hope prevails over loss. The metaphor which contrives this victory is the equation of night with ignorance; however, it is this metaphor which undoes itself in the duplicity of its equation; for if ignorance comes on like night, so will knowledge like the new day, and the cycle will begin again, for ever keeping the idea of a beginning in alternate freeplay with the idea of a return.

Riddel emphasises the Heideggerian qualities of the poem as follows:

The poet as wanderer incorporates both the experience of discontinuity and the dream of continuity. Descent and ascent replace either the dream of the 'eternal return' (Persephone) or the tragedy of loss (Orpheus). Descent and ascent become endless and reciprocal acts of the poet, which generate in their reciprocity a 'dance' of 'contending forces', 'a picture of perfect rest' like the image of the vortex. The picture is the poem which aspires to reveal itself not as perfection, or totalization, but as the 'stability' of 'contending forces'. It is a structure of necessary opposites which denies the possibility of a superintending or transcendent source. But it is a 'picture of perfect rest', calling attention to itself as fictional, imaginary, as art rather than nature.²¹

One might call the poem self-deconstructive in the sense that the despair at absence questions the incipience of presence which its metaphors generate; but if the poem can be shown to recognise the fictionality of its own metaphoric resolution of beginning with returning, it becomes Heideggerian in a sense which excludes the

Derridean. The really crucial question is one of priority of emphasis. Does what Riddel call its 'contention of forces' ultimately decide the matter in favour of a poetics of presence or in favour of a deconstructed freeplay of absence?

Murray Krieger, for instance, would answer this question in favour of a poetics of presence. He puts before the reader of his *Theory of Criticism* (1976) and his more recent *Poetic Presence and Illusion* (1979) the possibility of a way opposite to that of Derrida, by returning a privileged status for poetic language by virtue of 'the poet's capacity to remake the words he finds'. 'Derrida's persistent denial of verbal presence in writing can thus be converted into a forceful argument for presence in poetry-as-fiction.'²² This is exactly what Stevens adumbrates in 'The Pure Good of Theory' as the form of a belief in necessary fictions:

To say the solar chariot is junk
Is not a variation but an end.
Yet to speak of the whole word as metaphor
Is still to stick to the contents of the mind

And the desire to believe in a metaphor,
It is to stick to the nicer knowledge of
Belief, that what it believes in is not true.

One of his 'Adagia' puts the matter succinctly: 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.'²³ Following Stevens, a critic like Frank Kermode calls this fictionalism, what Hans Vaihinger, following Nietzsche, called *The Philosophy of 'As If'*.

If metaphor (or fictionalism) is inherent in all language, as Derrida would claim, then this fictionalism in no way restores presence for the poet. It merely internalises it as a function of the text, it decentres the fiction from outside language into a perpetual freeplay within language. If, on the other hand, the metaphoric structures of poetry are intrinsically different from and more privileged than the metaphoricity inherent in ordinary language, as Heidegger would claim, poems like 'The Descent' affirm fictions which belong to a poetics of restructured presence even though (or perhaps because) they believe in what they believe knowing that they believe in their own fictions.

Moving on to the first of the two poems from Stevens, we again confront an Heideggerian predicament. But first, we observe, in general, that Stevens is even more self-reflexive as a poet than Williams. A typical Stevens poem tends to be about itself, about the metaphoricality of poetic language, about the distance between words and things, between language and reality, and about the ways in which such dualisms may be resolved, even if only in the fictions of desire. Stevens's is then necessarily a poetry about the theory of poetry. He explains the necessity thus in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven':

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

For J. Hillis Miller 'Stevens's poetry is . . . not merely about poetry. It is a poetry that is the battleground among conflicting theories of poetry.' Miller isolates the three principal theories which, according to him, are 'as old as our Western tradition':

One theory operative in Stevens's work is the idea that poetry is imitation, mimesis, analogy, copy. . . . The structure of the poem should correspond to the structure of reality. . . . According to the second theory, poetry is an act. It is the act of the mind seeking a revelation through the works and in the words. Poetry is a revelation in the visible and reasonable of that which as the base of reason cannot be faced directly or said directly. There is, however, a third theory of poetry present in Stevens's poems. This is the notion that poetry is creation, not discovery. In this theory, there is nothing outside the text. All meaning comes into existence with language and in the interplay of language. Meaning exists only in the poem.²⁴

It is when this theory of poetry as creation dominates in Stevens's poems that he is most Heideggerian. Consider how Heidegger on 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry' offers what is virtually a gloss on the first poem from Stevens's 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction':

Since language really became actual as conversation the gods have acquired names and a world has appeared . . . the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not merely a consequence of the actualization of language, they are contemporaneous with it. And this to the extent that it is precisely in the naming of the gods, and in the transmutation of the world into word that the real conversation, which we ourselves are, consists. . . .

Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word . . . when the gods are named originally and the essence of things receives a name, so that things for the first time shine out, human existence is brought into a firm relation and given a basis. . . .

Poetry is the foundation which supports history. . . . First of all it appeared that the field of action of poetry is language. Hence the essence of poetry must be understood through the essence of language. Afterwards it became clear that poetry is the inaugural naming of being and of the essence of all things – not just any speech, but that particular kind which for the first time brings into the open all that which we then discuss and deal with in everyday language. Hence poetry never takes language as a raw material ready to hand, rather it is poetry which first makes language possible.²⁵

Thus, according to Heidegger, the act of naming itself confers reality. As George Steiner summarises this Heideggerian emphasis:

In some perilous sense, the poet is a re-creator who challenges the absent gods, does their work for them. . . . The nerve of poetry is the act of *nomination*. Authentic poetry does not 'imitate' as Plato would have it, or 'represent' or 'symbolize', as post-Aristotelian literary theory supposes. It *names*, and by naming it makes real and lasting. The underlying motif here is that

one of Adam's nomination, in the Garden, of every living thing.²⁶

Stevens too, like Williams, is an Adamic poet. Like the poet of 'The Descent' he too lives in a Fallen world, burdened by the accomplishments of memory, by the dead weight of all the past names for the sun which prevent his poetic ephebe from seeing it in its true being. Just as the poet of 'The Descent' wished and then willed ignorance so that he could forget the past and thus begin afresh, Stevens's ephebe must become ignorant of all past names and metaphors for the sun, the origin and source of being in the natural world, before he can truly perceive and nominate the presence of this source and beginning.

The act of forgetting that Stevens wills onto his ephebe he was to define later, in 1951, in the essay, 'The Relation between Poetry and Painting', as 'decreation':

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grace* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers.²⁷

The temptation to equate Stevens's decreation with Derridean deconstruction is great, and indeed Riddel succumbs to it voluntarily, in his equation of 'decreate' with 'to participate in an act of de-centering';²⁸ but Charles Altieri urges a distinction worth meditating: decreation

continues to seek qualities of perception and forms of poetic knowledge by at once cleansing and transforming outmoded expressive and descriptive vehicles. Decreation alters the economy of consciousness by exploring new modes of exchange among its used and various coins. Deconstruction, on the other hand, invokes the spirit of sceptical lucidity. Deconstruction is primarily a critical act devoted to displaying the irreducible interchange of sense and nonsense in the overlapping codes on which discourse is ultimately dependent. Deconstruction shows contradictions in intentions while decreation intentionally posits contradictions to suggest new integrations.²⁹

With this cautionary distinction between decreation and deconstruction in mind, we can now examine Riddel's reading of Stevens's poem as a fair sample of deconstructive criticism in action:

Notes opens with an imperative: a nameless father insists to his 'ephebe' that one can only recapitulate the fiction of Adamic naming by using an old memory system (language) to forget or overwrite that system, so as to overcome, if only in a fiction, the belatedness signified by all naming. Or, in other words, to name in such a way as to repress the problematic of naming: . . . to begin again in such a way that beginning is marked as fiction, an original secondariness, as it were. This is only a strategy of marginalia to overcome the pathos of the pseudo-beginning, to re-mark a beginning long since begun. This beginning again can occur only within a representational system (metaphor) that is marked through and through by a contradiction. The system reveals itself as irreducibly figural, so that to think the 'first idea' or the name of the origin of the system, one has first to think or be thought by the system. Yet the representational or signifying or naming system, which Stevens calls variously the 'poem' or 'fiction', necessarily precedes what it is constructed to represent: the pure 'thing itself' or 'Supreme fiction'. . . .

Any name of the sun is a metaphor that marks the discontinuity of perception and language. But the 'sun' itself is irreducibly a name, for that idea cannot be perceived directly. Even the (impossible) perception of the sun is a metaphor, which the 'ephebe' must forget if he is to ground his beginning in the truth of an origin (a 'first idea') beyond the self, an 'idea' itself original because it is without origin. . . . 'The project for the sun' is that it 'must bear no name'. To begin is to forget the metaphoricity of the sun, to evoke the origin of poetry in a truth preceding language. . . . A poetic language always plays between the pure notions of beginning and end, a 'first idea' and its recuperation. The poem is the sign of the temporal and marginal, a play of differences, and of that 'desire' for the idea signified in every erasure or every forgetting that the idea is already always a sign, another text.³⁰

The kind of realisation both poet and critic are driving at is expressed by Stevens elsewhere in his work as the sense that 'It is a

world of words to the end of it', in which 'words of the world are the life of the world'.³¹ In the close resemblance between the language of the poet and that of the critic is the common statement of a group of themes: the absence of presence, the belated secondariness of language, the word's desire to encompass the world (the poetic logos made flesh), the nostalgia for a firstness at a source which can only be reacquired by a new beginning.

The crucial question we must now consider is whether the critic has anything to say of the poem that the poem does not directly or indirectly say itself; in other words, can the deconstructionist 'show the text "what it does not know"'? If we recognise that the critic is merely restating in a Derridean vocabulary what the poem states in terms of its search for a 'first idea', then the poem anticipates the critic in deconstructing itself. But whether it does self-deconstruct must depend on the alternatives mentioned by Derrida in the face of the 'thematic of broken immediateness':³² nostalgic and Rousseauist or Nietzschean in its affirmation of the freeplay of meaning. Another way of putting the alternatives is to ask ourselves the question whether the poem is, in the ultimate analysis, restorative of presence (within the fictions of metaphor and language) or resigned to the acceptance of absence (which the fictions of language do nothing to ameliorate).

The question can perhaps be answered more easily if we first look at what the acceptance of absence does really mean for Stevens. One of his early poems, 'The Snow Man', speaks of beholding 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is'.³³ Throughout his career Stevens could scarcely bring himself to contemplate 'the nothing that is' there without the aid of ameliorative fictions, the leaves of poetry curing the ground of being (as a late poem, 'The Rock', puts it). Therefore, when, in one of his last poems, 'The Course of a Particular', Stevens does gather the courage to face the nothing of the Nietzschean affirmation, the moment has special import and poignancy:

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind.

.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smokedrift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Then they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

The chill nothingness or meaninglessness of reality devoid of the poet's fictive leaves is what a truly self-deconstructive poem would bring itself to face up to and live with. In our final poem, the last from Stevens's *Collected Poems*, it is the benumbing feeling of being trapped in a solipsistic private world of sensations and fictions that the poet resists. Thus if a poem like 'The Course of a Particular' cannot bear to confront a pure reality untouched by the humanism of metaphor, 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' cannot bear to live in the illusory world of sensations and metaphors without the reassuring certainty of a reality outside the mind and its human constructs. The problem faced by the poem is that of Cartesian dualism, of the irreducible split between the mind as subject and reality as object, between the Emersonian I and the surrounding not-I. As in the previous poem, the strategy is that of heliotropism; a turning towards the reality of the sun as a parental and primal source and origin of being.

Riddel, in his 1965 book on Stevens describes the poem as proclaiming

a discovery of the 'thing' beyond the mind, but . . . this 'thing' shares with the mind a mutual origin (in the 'colossal sun') . . . the self, as part of nature, shares a bodily being with the sun. But as it moves toward consciousness, the mind composes its own world. . . . Man can know of otherness but not know it – except as he is sustained and hence contained by it. The 'new Knowledge', however minimal, of the world, is an escape from solipsism, but in no sense a resolution to Stevens's problem.³⁴

The problem has a literary antecedent in the Romantics. Paul de Man notes that

critics such as M. H. Abrams see Coleridge as the great synthesizer and . . . take his dialectic of subject and object to be the authentic pattern of romantic imagery. But this forces them, in fact, into a persistent contradiction. They are obliged, on the one hand, to assert the priority of object over subject that is implicit

in an organic conception of language. . . . Yet in the same paragraph Abrams quotes the passages from Wordsworth and Coleridge that confer an equally absolute priority to the self over nature.³⁵

In his poetry as a whole Stevens oscillates between these contraries: the alternate priorities of subject and object, self and nature. If the stimuli for sensations originate outside the mind, an external world can be constructed and believed in, if, on the other hand, our sensations are like metaphors themselves, then their constructs have little validity outside the mind. The deconstructive Riddel picks on the second possibility:

Nietzsche radically situates the notions of essence and truth, located as it were in the 'thing-in-itself', in the evasions and discontinuities of language that are taken for 'truth' because the origins of truth in metaphoric accident have been forgotten.

For Nietzsche, even a percept is a 'first metaphor', discontinuous with the unknowable stimulus that provoked it, and language, or the sign . . . of the percept is a metaphor of a metaphor, a 'second metaphor' at best. There can be no movement of essence or presence through these discontinuous planes, hence no access to a 'truth' or its 'origin', the 'thing-in-itself', by a regression from late to earlier metaphors.³⁶

Thus the deconstructionist will fix upon one word in Stevens's relieved declaration: 'It was like/ A new knowledge of reality.' The word, of course, is 'like'; that word which subverts the force of full assertion by its introduction of the element of analogy. What the poem would like to retrieve, what it appears to retrieve is the claim:

It was a new knowledge of reality.

But it questions its own putative claim to firm knowledge by the use of the word 'like' and all that this simile implies. Thus a would-be affirmation of presences outside the mind is withdrawn into a mere analogy, the desire for a union of all beings, including the mind. Dualism and difference can be resolved, but only in the figurations of language. The poem thus performs an act of self-qualification which, in view of the poet's desires, must be seen as an act of self-subversion, or self-deconstruction. The poet's suc-

cour lies in language, its capacity for lies. Whether these deliberate lies, or illusions restore any semblance of a presence is the question.

Each of our three illustrative poems will have contributed – I hope – to a sense of what I mean by a Heideggerian poetry. It should also be apparent that the themes and procedures of such poetry show an awareness of and concern about precisely those philosophic issues that deconstruction focuses on. The difference between the two is one of emphasis. The deconstructionist would not mind admitting to a poetics of absence. Indeed, all his intentions are focused on making the texts he reads to admit, under duress, of a similar poetics of absence. In poetry he does this by showing that the metaphoricity of language reduces its own approximations of priority to a permanent secondariness or belatedness, proscribing all fictions of presence within the bounds of language. Poets like Stevens show a full awareness of their predicament. Thus the Heideggerian poet and the Derridean critic speak the same language, use the same vocabulary, but with differing emphases. Krieger illustrates the difference in terms of 'the positive print and the negative of a photograph, both seeming to have the same reality (or unreality), but with reverse emphases, the lights of one being the darks of the other'.³⁷

The Heideggerian poet wants to believe so badly that the objects of his belief become subservient functions of this want, and if he cannot have the presence of a transcendental signified, he is willing to appease his want with the figments of presence. Thus, for him, even these illusory figments or ghosts of presence have sufficient reality to them to serve the function of denying absence.

In conclusion, then, I would venture to suggest that poetries like those of Williams and Stevens represent, in phenomenological terms, intentional acts which intend presence, however illusorily their texts attain it; whereas deconstruction, on the other hand, intends absence. And if, to the deconstructionist, a poetic text becomes self-deconstructive in its subversion of the presence it intends, to the Heideggerian poet conscious of the minimal and token satisfactions afforded by and in language, his awareness itself deconstructs the deconstructive possibilities inherent in his text, like two negatives cancelling themselves, to leave the tokens of presence to be reconstructed by and in the poetic text.

The deconstructive method may be recognised as salutary in offering us a particularly acute insight into the humanist poet's

reduced and impoverished predicament, and its metaphors of decentring and freeplay, and its notion of a text as an interpretation of itself and of its pre-texts are new and challenging by subversive additions to the critical repertoire. But, in the final analysis, it must be recognised that the emotional and intentional force of the Heideggerian poet, his sense of a near-tragic predicament and the heroism of language with which he rises to the occasion, make him for better or worse, though besieged and diminished, still a humanist and not a deconstructionist.

Notes

1. 'Jacques Derrida', in *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford, 1979) pp. 159, 172.
2. *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (London, 1979) p. 37.
3. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976) p. 158.
4. 'Translator's Preface', *Of Grammatology*, p. lxix.
5. Quoted by Spivak, *ibid.*, p. lxxv.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. lxxv-vi.
7. *Blindness and Insight* (New York, 1971) p. 116.
8. *Of Grammatology*, p. lxxvi.
9. 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore, Md., 1970) p. 248.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
14. *Ibid.*
15. 'Jacques Derrida', pp. 170-1.
16. Joseph N. Riddel, 'Interpreting Stevens: an Essay on Poetry and Thinking', *Boundary 2* (Fall 1972) p. 81.
17. *Blindness and Insight*, p. 29.
18. *William Carlos Williams*, Penguin Critical Anthology, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Harmondsworth, Middx., 1972) pp. 162-4.
19. Quoted by Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and Counter-poetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge, La., 1974) p. 57.
20. Quoted by *ibid.*, p. 58.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
22. *Theory of Criticism* (Baltimore, Md., 1976) p. 233.
23. *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York, 1957) p. 163.
24. *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, N. J., 1980) pp. 275-9.

25. *Existence and Being*, ed. Warner Brock (Chicago, Ill., 1949).
26. *Heidegger* (Glasgow, 1978) p. 138.
27. *The Necessary Angel* (New York, 1951) pp. 174–5.
28. *The Inverted Bell*, p. 214.
29. 'Motives in Metaphor: John Ashbery and Modernist Long Poems', *Genre*, xi (Winter 1978) p. 661.
30. *Wallace Stevens*, pp. 317–19.
31. *Collected Poems*, pp. 345, 474.
32. *The Structuralist Controversy*, p. 264.
33. *Collected Poems*, p. 10.
34. *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge, La., 1965) pp. 275–6.
35. 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', *Interpretations: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, Md., 1969) pp. 181–2.
36. *Wallace Stevens*, p. 356.
37. *Theory of Criticism*, p. 230.

9

The Anxiety of American Deconstruction

HOWARD FELPERIN

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again: finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.

(Kafka, *Leopards in the Temple*)

That deconstruction has manifested, over the past decade, an uncanny power to arouse anxiety in the institutions of learning that house and host it, will come as no surprise to students of the movement. Having at last been accepted as a fact of institutional life, deconstruction now presents us with the problem of how best to live with and control it, like a recently discovered disease that has proved not to be fatal, as was first feared, but merely discomfiting, and for which there is still no known cure, though research continues. If we have not yet learned how to stop worrying altogether and love deconstruction, we have at least passed beyond the initial shock of its recognition. There are even signs that deconstruction may prove, in the course of its progress, to be self-deconstructing, that is self-curing, so that those who come down with it may eventually find themselves diagnosed as normal once again, well and truly able to carry out business as usual. And if that turns out to be the case – so runs the argument of this paper – it will be a new and serious occasion for anxiety.

In looking back at the early institutional reaction to deconstruction when it emerged in the late sixties and early seventies, it is not difficult to identify the source and account for the strength of the anxiety it produced. Deconstruction was – well – different. ‘Difference’ or *différance* was, after all, its philosophical watchword and

principle, and the new terminologies and methodologies with which it intervened in the institutional discourse were certainly different from those the institution, particularly the Anglo-American institution, was used to. Not only was deconstruction different from the critical and pedagogical practices in place in the sense of being alien and unfamiliar – that, after all, was true of structuralism as well – but deconstruction appeared to be disturbingly different from itself, maddeningly elusive in the unpredictable repertoire of terms and procedures then being mounted in rapid succession under its name: ‘differance’, ‘misprision’, ‘apor-ia’, ‘undecidability’, ‘*mise en abîme*.’ . . . what would they think of next? Not quite or yet a school or a movement, its reluctance or inability to routinise itself – as distinct from structuralism’s eagerness to do so – rendered it uniquely threatening to any institutional mentality. This potential enemy was doubly dangerous for being at once different and protean, not fully or clearly one thing or the other, indistinctly different. At a time when the older orthodoxies of new and practical criticism were under challenge from several theoretical quarters, deconstruction was sometimes conflated in the general alarm with other heretical movements, mistaken for a version of structuralism or confused with a kind of Marxism, as often by the heretics themselves, anxious for avant-garde reinforcement, as by the defenders of the old faith, indiscriminating in the acuteness of their sense of present danger. Only at a later stage in the ongoing triumph of theory could it begin to be recognised that deconstruction stands against not only the old New Criticism but also in mighty and binary opposition to the methodological novelties of Marxism and semiotics.

As its oxymoronic self-appellation suggested from the beginning, deconstruction was always, given its negative understanding of the differential and deferential nature of language and textuality, a practice oppositional to all philosophies of construction, the newer as well as the older, an anti-methodical method. Operating from the margins, it exposed and released the anxiety of reference and representation at the only too metaphorical heart of more conventional methods, the anxiety necessarily repressed in the interest of any claim to a positive or systematic knowledge of literary texts on which our academic institutions have traditionally been based. As a form of oppositional practice, deconstruction gained considerable strategic and tactical advantage of its marginal or liminal status – comparable to that of such other liminal phe-

nomena as ghosts, guerillas or, indeed, viruses – over its more clearly defined, predictable, indeed institutionalised, and therefore vulnerable opponents and would-be allies. With the linguistic resourcefulness and mobility accruing from an extreme language-scepticism, deconstruction had the capacity to come in under existing or emerging critical systems at their weakest point, the linguistic bad faith on which they were built. It could thus undermine the extroverted and hypertrophied structuration of semiotics with mole-like persistence, worrying away at its linguistic underpinnings until its Babel-like towers teetered vertiginously before collapsing into the groundlessness of their own pseudo-scientific discourse. Or it could take the rhetorical ‘ground’, the historiographic soap-box as it were, out from under the solemn hectoring of Althusserian Marxism, leaving it with a lost sense of direction and the fuddlement of acute aporia. It is hardly necessary to mention in this context the deconstructive subversion, or more accurately, sublation of New Criticism itself, in so far as American (as distinct from French) deconstruction carried to an unforeseen flashpoint some of New Criticism’s most cherished principles. By scrutinising the words on the page harder than New Criticism ever had, deconstruction discovered not their translucent and freestanding autonomy but, in a radical defamiliarisation, their dark, even opaque, character as writing, black marks on white paper; not organic unity that binds together irony, paradox and ambiguity in a privileged, indeed redeemed and redeeming, language, but unrecoverable rhetorical discontinuity. Little wonder, then, that of the several schools of criticism vying for institutional dominance, deconstruction was, in its difference, the most feared, vilified and misprised.

Nor is there need, in the present context, to document in any great detail the political and psychological conflicts that no doubt lent added piquancy, even at times acrimony, to what might have been quite amicable philosophical differences. We are dealing, after all, with recent institutional history to which most of us have borne witness, and it does not take a Michel Foucault to remind us of the will to power that inheres in any will to knowledge and its institutional discourse. Suffice it to say that considerable power was, and still is, at stake, nothing less than that latent in the pedagogical discourse and practice of literary study at all levels, from post-graduate programmes down to the school curriculum – more on this shortly – so the anxiety has run high in proportion to

the stakes at risk. While the agitation has so far been felt mainly at the top of the pyramid, it is clear to all concerned that the repercussions could be massive and long term. For those critics concerned not with maintaining the continuity of institutionalised literary study in something like its present historical formalism, but with transforming it into a revolutionary political practice, deconstruction has come to be identified as an élitist cult and a reactionary force. More or less explicit in the work of such Marxist or leftward commentators as Hayden White, Frank Lentricchia, Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton, is the view of deconstruction as regressive, a throwback not to the Russian formalism of 1910–30, as was structuralist poetics, but, if anything, to the dandyist aestheticism of the 1890s, a displaced religion of art. The ultra-high formalism of deconstruction, arising from its obsession with linguistic difference and duplicity, returns criticism in such a view, to the idealist metaphysics from which it was supposed to deliver it, while the practitioners of deconstruction become *capi* of a hermeneutic mafia or the high priests of a new mystery cult. The mark of such a cabal is its style – a frequent target for all opposing sides – or rather its styles. For even after allowing that deconstruction has many styles, what they have in common is the challenge of difficulty and danger. So much so that charges of a deliberate obscurantism designed to exclude all but an élite – only those who already know will understand and so be saved – are not infrequent.

But the strongest reaction by far to deconstruction, one less allergic but much more alarmist than that of the Marxists, has come from the upper reaches of the literary-critical establishment across the English-speaking world. This is not really surprising, since it has the most to lose. For such figures as René Wellek, M. H. Abrams and E. D. Hirsh – to confine ourselves for the moment to America – deconstruction poses a fundamental threat to the institutional and pedagogical practices of a long-dominant critical and historical humanism going back to the Renaissance. Despite their conscientious pastoral care, that orthodoxy is breaking up, and deconstruction offers no help in holding it together. Quite the opposite: as a theory of language and literary language subversive of the notion that the meanings of literary texts are determinate or determinable – much less, in Abrams's phrase, 'obvious and univocal', and hence the notion that the study, not to mention the practice, of literature is a socially meaningful and valuable activity -

deconstruction has been rejected as 'apocalyptic irrationalism', 'cognitive atheism' and 'dogmatic relativism'.

The fine excess of these phrases, the woundingness or woundedness of these words, should not be underestimated. The self-avowed language scepticism that deconstruction cultivates, indeed flaunts, as its philosophical programme (or counter-programme), its self-proclaimed resistance to the imperialistic or totalitarian tendencies toward 'positive and exploitative truth' built into any critical system – be it Marxist or semiological, historical or New-Critical – obviously have grave institutional consequences. In this respect, deconstruction is a voice (or, as we shall see, several distinct voices) crying out not in the desert but amid the superabundance of our over-nourished institutions. Or perhaps more precisely, crying out within the desert of that superabundance. How else should the established institution react to a school that must, by its own logic, oppose institutionalisation, with its tendencies toward consensus and routine, as yet another manifestation of the original philosophical sins of logocentricity, positivism and reification? What, after all, is an 'establishment', or an 'institution' if not something only too pervasively and oppressively present? Worse yet, the rebels who are making these defiant gestures toward existing institutional authority are, it might seem, rebels without a cause, some of the institution's own favourite sons. Harold Bloom is the former student of M. H. Abrams at Cornell; Geoffrey Hartman, of René Wellek at Yale. Even Paul de Man, as a teaching fellow at Harvard, served his time under Reuben Brower in one of the smaller but more fruitful vineyards of 'close reading'. Yes, there seems to be an element of Oedipal re-enactment at work, with overreaction on both sides, on the part of the fathers as well as the sons. When Abrams maintains the availability of literature's 'obvious and univocal sense', or René Wellek reaffirms the achievements of Yale formalism against the 'apocalyptic irrationalism' of its deconstructive successors, these academic patriarchs are insisting, like latter-day Lears, that in our dealings with language, something, even if it lacks the total conviction of ultimate certainty, is preferable to nothing: 'Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.' Imagine their shock and dismay to hear their own beloved offspring reply that the something they cherish and affirm is based on and amounts to nothing more than philosophical nostalgia or wishful thinking. What else could the patriarchal reaction be when filiation itself, once conceived as a benign

relation on which something precious is based – be it literary influence or real estate – is put into question. All the more disturbing when those who raise the question are themselves – again like Cordelia – the apples of the patriarchal eye.

From a sense of *lèse-majesté* on behalf of the institutional superstructure, it is a short step to offence on behalf of the affronted subject. What is the subject, after all, except what it is defined to be by those who are officially, that is institutionally, appointed to teach it. So that any critique of the institution, *a fortiori* a critique so radically sceptical, is necessarily construed as a critique, in this case virtually a dissolution or demolition, of the subject itself. In this respect the reaction to deconstruction is analogous to an early and still persistent reaction to psychoanalysis: an irrational fear that, if this sort of analytical activity is pursued, the subject of it, be it literature, the personality or even the person himself, will veritably disappear, be analysed, as it were, out of existence. The fear of self-annihilation in its extreme form may also be akin to the superstition among some primitive tribes that photography steals the souls of its subjects. From the standpoint of deconstruction, what both fears – that literature or human personality have their very existence imperilled by some ways of scrutinising them – have in common is a superstitious or magical, or sacramental view of language, within which the relation between signifier and signified is a sacred and inviolate given: words mean exactly what they say. Hence the primal terror aroused in some quarters by the very term 'deconstruction' – after all, the word has the same root-meaning as 'analysis', an 'unmaking' – quite apart from the actual disintegrative thrust of deconstructionist, indeed all structuralist and post-structuralist thinking, in which that fundamental relation of language is seen to be problematic.

It is worth pointing out at this stage, however, that this view of deconstruction as a nihilist plot is incompatible with the view of it as an élitist cult. Why would the high priests of a religion of literature want to abolish the source of their status and power? Such a state of affairs would be akin to the mafia lobbying for the extirpation of opium networks in South-East Asia, or to the venerable comic routine of a man sawing off the bough on which he sits. Deconstruction cannot, within Aristotelian logic at least, be what each of its chief polemical opponents has claimed – a priestly cult and a nihilist plot – at one and the same time. Or can it? We could reply that within current institutional politics, deconstruction may

well seem élitist and conservative in relation to Marxism, while in relation to our established formalism it may seem utterly radical. But to leave it at that would be to play into the hands of deconstruction by accepting its extension of the structural linguistic principle; that which has its existence within a system of differences with no positive terms is in the nature of the case contradictory, perverse, multivocal, mind-boggling, thus leaving the scandalous undecidability of its institutional position intact.

To leave it at that would also be to let deconstruction off the hook of its own real or potential anxiety, for what I am arguing in this paper is that deconstruction is, or ought to be, not only the cause of that anxiety in the institution, but institutionally anxious in itself. This latter anxiety arises out of its own uncertain potential for institutionalisation, the questionable capacity of a practice so profoundly oppositional, sceptical and anti-systematic to turn into a transmissible, teachable programme in its own right. For there is great potential for anxiety in deconstruction's apparent desire to destabilise the interpretive structures and conventions through which institutional authority is manifested and perpetuated, while remaining unwilling quite to relinquish any claim to institutional authority for its own practices. In institutional terms, what the new Marxists and the old New Critics have in common is the premise that authority in interpretation is necessary and resides in communal, that is institutional, consensus; each is anti-authoritarian only with respect to the other's authority conferring community. Both are threatened and scandalised by a deconstructive anti-authoritarianism so radically individualistic or solipsistic that it denies the interpretative authority and the communal basis for it, not only of other communities but of its own community – to the extent it can be said to form one – as well, and then has the further audacity to insist on its own institutional pride of place. These conflicting impulses within deconstruction express themselves in the apparent insouciance with which deconstruction transgresses the communal rules of the language game known as literary criticism while continuing to play it, in repeatedly exceeding the rules of the game by introducing an element of freeplay deriving from a heightened and ever-present awareness that the rules of the game were arbitrary in the first place. Such a gambit might be tolerable even to other players who are playing more 'seriously', that is conventionally – who are so caught up in the game, and have so internalised its rules, that they have forgotten or repressed

their own awareness (if they ever were aware), of the original arbitrariness or groundlessness of those rules. But it becomes intolerable once it is clear to these honest souls that the deconstructive transgressors, the disintegrated consciousnesses at the table, are not just kibitzing, but playing to win, and have one eye firmly fixed on the institutional stakes. That is having it both ways, or as some would call it, cheating. In either case it is breaking the rules that the community has agreed to play by, the rules that by virtue of this agreement, may be said to constitute the community.

Deconstruction's desire to have it both ways, to be in the community, even in its mainstream or bloodstream, but not of it, is more than a matter of wanting institutional prestige and influence, while violating some of the institution's most honoured conventions and taboos, like making more puns than is thought seemly, or writing books without footnotes. It is a matter of putting into question the very constitutional and contractual basis, the social rationale of consent, on which the institutionalised interpretative community exists, what may be termed its major premise that there is something which requires and justifies, in social and historical terms, the service it renders, and for the sake of which it structures its activities. That something, that *sine qua non* and *raison d'être*, is the presumed existence of literary or poetic, as distinct from ordinary, language. Here we encounter a further paradox that the one deconstructionist for whom, as far as I can tell, this distinctive category does not exist, is also the one who is least subject to, and least the object of, institutional anxiety. For Derrida, as for the late Roland Barthes, the category of literary language has dissolved, through the powerful reagent of *différance*, into writing and textuality in general. The relative absence of anxiety over and in Derrida – this is admittedly hard to measure – may well have to do with the primarily philosophical context of his work. For the institution of philosophical, as distinct from literary, study has long since given away any social or missionary rationale and is to that extent less predisposed, if not quite immune, to institutional anxiety. The idea has been around for some time now among philosophers, particularly Anglo-American philosophers, that theirs is a highly technical language-game of only marginal social and practical consequence, and whether or not they accept this view, the re-emergence under the name of deconstruction of extreme language-scepticism in the mode of play is not likely to carry much shock-value for those familiar with the work of Nietz-

sche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. We shall have to return to the marginal standing of philosophy as an institution; for literary deconstruction, as we shall see, continues to propose a dubious merger with it.

It is American – specifically Yale – deconstruction, proceeding, as it does, very much upon the humanist premise of literariness, and aware of the increasingly imperilled centrality of its institutionalised study for culture at large, that occasions the anxieties I have been describing. Perhaps the richest irony of the situation is that the definitions of literary language this deconstruction still feels compelled to produce, ought to be, as the only post-structuralist defence of poetry on offer, the shibboleth of institutional acceptance, indeed, respectability. But that defence is so uncanny and paradoxical that it does not feel to the institution like a defence at all. Rather, it seems more like a surrender of the power of literary language to engage with, let alone enhance, anything beyond itself that might, in turn, lend it privilege, validity or, in the language of the Supreme Court, ‘redeeming social value’, in particular the moral, mimetic or expressive value conferred on it by traditional poetics:

For the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge. . . . The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence. It is always against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave.

I have not selected this definition of literary language from the work of Paul de Man because his definition is singularly fugitive or teasing. Definitions comparably threatening to the institution’s sense of cultural mission could be culled from the work of Geoffrey Hartman, for whom art is characterised by the ‘generic impurity’ of being ‘ambiguously involved with sacred and profane’ and ‘always inauthentic *vis-à-vis* the purity of ritual and *vis-à-vis* a thorough-going realism’, or even from the work of Harold Bloom, for whom

a poem is not a relief or release from, or a resolution or expression of, an anxiety, but itself 'an anxiety'. I single out de Man's definition because it states in terms more unrecuperable and uncompromising, more austere and demanding if you will, than the others, the deconstructive defence of poetry as a denial of precisely what the institution of literary study has traditionally thought of itself as being about. Literature, for de Man, remains an enlightened mode of language, 'the only form of language' he calls it in the same passage, 'free from the fallacy of unmediated expression', but its enlightenment consists precisely in its disclaimer of what is normally claimed for it – its special immediacy or at least its special power to mediate something outside itself and something important to us. The revelation literature offers is that it can never be what the institution of its study blindly takes it to be.

Having brought out into the open, in luminous essay after essay, the anxiety of reference that blinds and vitiates the interpretative labours of the normal humanists who compose the institution, de Man might reasonably be expected to be urging that we put paid to those labours and dismantle the existing institutional support-system that sustains them. Or at least that we radically change the departmental and curricular structures that promote in their *Wissenschaftlich*, systematic way the ongoing misunderstanding of literature as something whose relation to and meaning for society can be ascertained by the historicist and/or formalist methods in place in the academy. It is just such a need for sweeping institutional change, after all, that the Marxists, given their own materialist demystification of bourgeois literary study, incessantly proclaim. They openly aspire to reconstitute the institution anew from the ground up, the ground being a not-so-new version of history and the study of literary forms giving way to the study of ideological formations. That may be, from the deconstructive viewpoint, only another and more intense manifestation of the old anxiety of reference, but at least it has the courage and candour of its conviction or fantasy. Indeed, some younger, self-styled deconstructionists of my acquaintance – none of them at Yale – would like to see the institutional structures that the old historicist and formalist anxiety of reference shores against its ruin give way to more expansive and flexible institutional structures that would bend with what they take to be the new bliss of difference that deconstruction – in its French forms at least – promises. They envision a carnivalisation of the institution in which the old divi-

sions between departments of national literature, between departments generally, disappears, and a new freeplay reigns, where students are given high marks for making puns and dispensing with footnotes. The logical outcome, in institutional terms, of deconstruction would surely have to be some kind of anti-institution, where the full writerly fluidity of differential inter-textuality could flourish without the guilt or anxiety induced and controlled by the oppressive superstructures and restrictive routines of departments, canons, methodologies and footnotes. Perhaps it was some such academy without walls that Barthes had in mind when he answered an interviewer's question about the place of literary study in the university to the effect that 'it should be the only subject'. After all, if deconstruction stands, as Richard Rorty suggests, in the same relation to 'normal' criticism and philosophy as 'abnormal' sexuality or science do to their 'normal' counterparts – 'each lives the other's death and dies the other's life' – should not its chief practitioners outspokenly advocate the legal and constitutional reform of the institution, if not actively attempt to found a new anti-institution of an unabashedly Utopian kind?

In fairness to the Yale deconstructionists, they have braved considerable communal opprobrium by proclaiming, up to a point, the unnegotiability of their differences with the institutional definition of the subject. 'A critic must choose', wrote J. Hillis Miller, 'either the tradition of presence or the tradition of difference, for their assumptions about language, about literature, about history, and about the mind cannot be made compatible.' Yet the cry for large-scale institutional reform that such incompatibility ought logically to issue has not been forthcoming. However different the deconstructive definition and defence of literature, it seeks neither blissfully to abolish a canon, nor radically alter it, nor even to rewrite afresh the institutional style-sheet of our dealings with it. Yale deconstruction may argue for, may even exemplify, the play of difference in its approach to literature, but there can be no mistaking that in so doing it is *hard* at play. No bliss, no *jouissance*, not even much *plaisir*, here in puritan New Haven, thank you: we prefer 'rigour', 'strenuousness', 'ruthlessness', anxiety and old-fashioned 'hard work'. For all its puns and abandonment of footnotes, this free play turns out to be very hard work after all. The highest compliment Geoffrey Hartman can pay to the work of Paul de Man is to call it 'a kind of generalized conscience of the act

of reading', and conscience, as students of medieval allegory well know, is no figure of fun, at least not in his work. What prevents Yale deconstruction, unlike its Parisian cousin, from abandoning the institutional controls of method and system, and embracing a complete *laissez-faire* regarding the object of that method and system, is the distinctly puritan work-anxiety it continues to share with the older institution, whose forms it largely accepts despite its declared differences with the traditional rationale for those forms.

But what, then, is the point of all this sweat and strain? Having relinquished all claim that the strenuous study of literature will confer on its students any positive benefit of cultural or historical identity, moral goodness, psychological wholeness or even philosophical wisdom – the traditional humanist justifications for the institutionalised study of the canon – Yale deconstruction seems content that the institution continue to exist for the sake of work alone, in so far as its *Aufhebung* of work is also an emptying out of work's former purposes and justifications:

The whole of literature would respond in similar fashion [that is, as Proust responds to de Man's deconstruction of his rhetoric], although the techniques and the patterns would have to vary considerably, of course, from author to author. But there is absolutely no reason why analyses of the kind here suggested for Proust would not be applicable, with proper modification of technique, to Milton or Dante or to Hölderlin. This will in fact be the task of literary criticism in the coming years.

What is at issue here is not the logic or accuracy of de Man's prediction – his prophecy, uttered more than five years ago, is coming only too true – but its tone of equanimity. Deconstruction is indeed proving thoroughly amenable to routinisation at the hands of the institution to whose authority it once seemed to pose such a challenge of incompatibility. More than that, it has all but become the institution, as its life and activity rapidly become indistinguishable from the life and activity of the institution at large, as one classic text after another is subjected to moves and reflexes increasingly predictable and programmatic, and the aporias and undecidabilities, the *mises en abîme* and impasses, the deferrals and misprisions in the canonical literature are relentlessly unfolded. Deconstruction has made so much work for us all, it

hardly seems to matter that not only do the traditional justifications for that work no longer apply, but no justification other than the technical challenge of the work itself seems to be offered.

It is at this point that the full anxiety of deconstruction begins to appear. The last thing deconstruction wants to be, or be seen to be, is an empty technology of the text, like its old rival, structuralist poetics. So it now emerges that the traditional humanist justifications of hermeneutics and history, according to de Man himself, may even reappear, if the institution only goes one step further in meeting the challenge:

It would involve a change by which literature, instead of being taught as a historical and humanistic subject, should be taught as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history. The institutional resistances to such a move, however, are probably insurmountable. . . .

Yet, with the critical cat now so far out of bag [*sic*] that one can no longer ignore its existence, those who refuse the crime of theoretical ruthlessness can no longer hope to gain a good conscience. Neither, or [*sic*] course, can the terrorists – but then, they never laid claim to it in the first place.

De Man's professed scepticism about the full institutionalisation of deconstruction is at this point surely rhetorical. The institutional 'change' he recommends is minimal and moderate – still no call for a full-blooded Utopia of differential bliss, but only for 'theoretical ruthlessness'. Such a change, in fact, has either already taken place, or soon will, as courses in, conferences on, and centres for the study of methodology and theory not only proliferate, but move from the periphery to the longed-for metaphorical 'centre' of the discipline.

But even if this change has already occurred, or is about to occur, why would de Man be content to see it happen? Why would deconstruction acquiesce in what, on its own terms, would be a form of self-destruction? How can it accept its own institutional routinisation with the same insouciance it once displayed in transgressing the institutional routines by which literature was supposed, by being reduced to law and order, to yield up its truth? If the diverse academic formalisations and normalisations, grammatisations and rhetorisations have been revealed, by de Man's own

highly principled practice, not to be capable of negotiating the transition from the semiotic to the hermeneutic and historical – that is, from sign to meaning – how is studying them *first*, logically or chronologically, going to help? That nostalgic or desired transition can *never*, by de Man's definition of literary language, be methodically made, no matter what new priority is given to the study of rhetoric and poetics, or with whatever 'theoretical ruthlessness' that study of method is pursued.

The 'critical cat' is indeed so far out of the bag that its existence cannot be ignored, but why should de Man think, or wish to think, it will find any ground, old or new, to stand on by seeking out departments of philosophy or theory? While the proposed merger of deconstructive criticism with philosophy and theory no doubt identifies an area of hard work shared by deconstruction and the traditional institution, that area would have to be, by de Man's own lights, one of continuing contention rather than new-found accord. For the interests at stake are opposed and incompatible. What has deconstruction taught us if not that there is no theoretical 'ground' so long dreamt of by philosophy outside of writerly practice, from which epistemology, ethics and now writerly practice itself can be positively described? What has Derrida taught us but that the philosophical tradition, including deconstruction, is writerly practice. De Man's proposed institutional merger with philosophy and theory – if he means by it the Kantian kind, and what else has poetics proved itself to be? – would be at once regressive and counterproductive. It would be like the managing director of a growing company recommending to its shareholders merger with an all but bankrupt competitor, whose imminent collapse will give the company a complete monopoly of the market. As Richard Rorty describes those 'weak textualists' who think they are adding the prestige of philosophy to their criticism when they discuss a writer's epistemology: 'Thus conquering warriors might mistakenly think to impress the populace by wrapping themselves in shabby togas stripped from the local senators.' On the other hand, if de Man is recommending merger with what Rorty terms the 'abnormal' philosophical tradition, culminating in Derrida and de Man himself, that variously denies the real or potential groundedness of discourse, he is recommending only what has already taken place. Whatever his Yale colleagues may mean by philosophy and theory when they recommend it, de Man

is certainly no 'weak textualist', and we must give him the benefit of the doubt by assuming it is the latter kind of merger he has in mind, which is to say, more of the same.

But in the very ambiguity of de Man's proposals, we sense the impasse confronting deconstruction as it ponders the possibilities of its institutional future and the full anxiety it quite properly feels in the situation. Too puritan and conscientious to abandon itself to the textual hedonism of its French counterpart, which in its Utopianism could never be institutionalised anyway, Yale deconstruction has only two courses open to it, neither of which it can pursue without anxiety. Either it can continue to attempt its project of opposition, which would now mean to oppose the routinisation of its own earlier practice by resisting the co-option of its techniques by the institution, now composed of its own graduate students and disciples, by withholding its blessing from the ongoing deconstruction of the canon by textual techniques now only too familiar and repetitive. It is, of course, an open question whether and how long even such resourceful critical minds as we are dealing with could maintain such an adversary role, could continue to devise new ways of rescuing difference from the authoritative presence they have become in the work of their epigones. Even if they could so maintain the energy of deconstruction, the puritan dissidence of their dissent, they would have to abandon all hope of institutional détente. That eventuality must be a cause for anxiety. The alternative would be to acquiesce fully in their present institutionalisation, to give their blessing to the wholesale routinisation of deconstruction that is now under way. For deconstruction to do that would be for it to cease to be deconstruction, for it to pass into institutional history. That thought, too, must cause considerable anxiety.

Whether the conscience of deconstruction is good or bad, it certainly exists and is powerful enough to bring upon itself in its current dilemma an acute *malconfort*, an aporia with a vengeance. For Paul de Man was never more clairvoyant than when, more than a decade ago, he foresaw his own present situation:

All true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis. . . . In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to literature: historical, philological, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism. . . . Whether authentic criticism is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole remains an open question.

This account of the nature of criticism as different from institutional norm is, of course, perfectly consistent with de Man's account of the nature of literature, and indeed underwrites deconstruction's own aspiration to literary status. Were deconstruction now to avoid crisis by acquiescing in the assimilation of its critical difference, its questionable status as a liability or an asset, by settling down under institutional auspices to the no longer hard but now empty labour of processing the entire literary canon, it would no longer be 'true criticism' but just another 'approach to literature'. Just as a number of critics in the mid-sixties, among them the present charismocrats of deconstruction, were writing against formalist and historical interpretation and calling, from within the institutional routine that new and practical criticism had become, for different styles of reading, so essays are now beginning to emerge from within theory – the present chapter is just one of them – against the institutionalisation of theory, including that of deconstructive theory.

Having all but prevailed within the academy and secured its institutional line of succession through the process described by Max Weber as the routinisation of charisma, some exponents of deconstructive theory now envision its expansion beyond the walls of departments of English, French, philosophy and comparative literature. Hillis Miller, for example, sees the time as right for colonising the pedagogy of the schools. So it was always written. And despite his caveats concerning theory, Geoffrey Hartman aims at nothing less than the repossession, in the name of literary theory, of the wider cultural discourse by an adventurous band of well-trained, versatile hermeneuts for hire, offering their skills for the decipherment of textuality in law, medicine and commerce. One cannot help wondering whether they are to be deconstructive textualists, and if so, imagining the sober justices of the Supreme Court listening to their briefs! Yet it was de Man himself who once cautioned that 'a literal-minded disciple of . . . Frye is given license to order and classify the whole of literature into one single thing which, even though circular, would nevertheless be a gigantic cadaver'. With its positive and positivist capability, its massive potential for reductive reification, Frye's protostructuralism once seemed the methodological antitype of deconstruction, with its insistence on negative capability, its inbuilt recalcitrance to being turned into 'positive and exploitative truth'. It was difficult indeed not to concur with Hartman that 'to imagine children of the future

performing little Anatomies as easily as they now do basic operations in mathematics may not be everyone's Utopia'. Fortunately for all of us, Frye's Utopia of 'Sweet science' did not quite come off. Perhaps that means there is still hope that we may yet be spared all the potential Utopias of deconstructive theory, where little aporias and *mises en abîme* are extrapolated from the world's textuality as easily, normally and literal-mindedly as 'close-readings' once were.

10

The Post-Turn Turn: Derrida, Gadamer and the Remystification of Language LEONARD ORR

To understand the language of a text is to recognize the world to which it refers.

(Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*)

Heidegger's own valorisation of the audible, of the logos and language which is *heard* is completely consistent with the radical temporality of the Being who is in-the-world, grounded in time.¹ For the Derrideans,

Writing has something of the character of an inscription, a mark offered to the world and promising, by its solidity and apparent autonomy, meaning which is momentarily deferred. Precisely for that reason it calls for interpretation, and our modes of interpretation are essentially ways of constructing communicative circuits into which we can fit.²

I will attempt to see now how through erasure, spacing, deconstruction, play, trace and *gramme*, the acceptance and promotion of the poet-word creator as prophet of Being, the deconstructors of the Derridean and Gadamerian school in a sense reinvest written language with the sense of *scripture*, of Holy Writ, of *mystification* once more.

Heidegger added a new wrinkle in his language in his *Zur Seinsfrage* (*On the Question of Being*). As Derrida notes, 'he lets the word "being" be read only if it is crossed out. . . . That mark of deletion is not, however, a "merely negative symbol" That deletion is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible . . . this last writing is also the first writing.'³ Through the offices of the *Kreuzweise Durchstrichung* the word which has been still remains in a shadow in the present; the word seems to be the same thing, yet it is not, it is a sign transformed by new significance which displaces the old, yet does not censure the former connotations of the word. This 'erasure' cannot be done to any word: it can only be done to a written word, obviously, and is meant for words which are redolent with existential permutations, that is 'being'. Derrida refers to such words as the 'arche', and those words which may be 'Xed' over, as 'the transcendental arche'. He warns us, however, that 'the value of the transcendental arche must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased'.⁴

The device of 'erasure' has here been singled out for two purposes: (a) it makes obvious the necessity of the Derrideans' non-Heideggerian valorisation of *visible* writing over *audible* speech: and (b) the explanation points out, in small, the direction of Derridean deconstruction which *supplements* the text, replaces and researches the blank spaces of the text, the spaces between the lines, the margins, the spaces between words.

In an interview, Derrida explained that '*Spacing* designates *nothing*, nothing existent, no presence at a distance; it is the index of an irreducible outside, and at the same time the index of a *movement*, of a displacement which indicates an irreducible alterity'.⁵ He is once again returning to his theme: the hidden meaning inherent in the text is found, not only by deconstructing the superficially given elements, but through dis- and replacement. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida elaborates, reminding us that the word *spacing* 'speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space' and 'is always the unperceived; the non-present, the nonconscious'.⁶ 'Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject.'⁷ This blurring of the barriers between the classical aesthetic antipodes of space and time is another element in the move

towards the valorisation of the text; one can hear the *logos* through the text, and see the word in speech. Also, Derrida's return of the unconscious adds new elements of 'play' in the interpretation of language: those psychoanalytic interpretations which have recently arisen in the criticism of Jacques Lacan, Paul Ricoeur and Derrida himself.⁸ Derrida seems dedicated to this combination of space and time. The word *différance* itself as Jeffrey Mehlman has noted, 'is a neologism – by virtue of the *a* – combining the temporal (*différer*, to defer) and spatial (*diffère*, to differ) modes of difference in a movement which is neither active nor passive'.⁹ This idea of deferred action, deferral, is also from Freud.¹⁰ We shall return to this Freudian influence shortly.

DECONSTRUCTION, DESTRUCTION, DEFERRAL AND DIFFÉRANCE

At a recent conference on post-modern critical theory,¹¹ one common complaint against the deconstructors, hermeneuticists, structuralists and semioticians, was that the critical theories employed are themselves so complex, rich and obviously enjoyably employed by the critics, that the criticism seems to valorise the role of the critic, even to a position superior to the position of the work. Thus Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has explained, in her translator's introduction to *Of Grammatology*, that

Deconstruction seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality – by thus 'placing it in the abyss' (*mettre en abîme*) . . . it shows us the allure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom.¹²

The deconstructive critics see their roles, perhaps, as doing to criticism what the French 'new novelists' are doing to fiction. Like the French new novelists, the deconstructive critics must begin with the attempt of overthrowing

the hierarchy. To neglect this phase of inversion is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of the opposition. It is

then to move too quickly . . . to a *neutralization* which, *in practice*, would leave the previous sphere intact, would entail giving up all means of actually *intervening* there.¹³ (Italics added)

Does this last group of phrases seem to be unusually bristling and warlike? If so, it is typical of the tone of the deconstructors who see themselves as dealing with an 'opposition' from whom truth must be wrested by violence, since all other means seem to have failed. Derrida asks, 'Why should one undertake the work of deconstruction instead of merely letting things stand? etc. Nothing happens here without a "violent intervention" (*coup de force*), somewhere. Deconstruction . . . is never neutral. It intervenes.'¹⁴ Language which is an 'event' becomes a 'rupture'.¹⁵ This, of course, is still the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* speaking through Derrida. Only Heidegger sought to wrest the originary or primordial meanings of the question of Being and the logos from the metaphysical tradition, also through 'violent intervention'. The word 'deconstruction' is Derrida's softening of Heidegger's more violent 'destruction' or Wallace Stevens's more complex 'decreation'. So deconstruction utilises the taking of the truth by force.

The main term used in Derridean deconstruction is *différance*, of which Lucette Finas offers a precise definition:

La *différance* fait jouer ensemble l'opération de différer (retarder, temporiser) et celle de distinguer, dissocier. Cette opération qui n'est ni active ni passive intervient non seulement dans le domaine du signe (signifiant ou signifié) mais dans le champ sans perdre du gramme ou de la trace. L'espacement (deviner-temps de l'espace ou deviner-espace du temps) met en scène et pervertit, à l'instar de toute opposition, l'opposition philosophique de l'espace et du temps. *Différance* sans produire une dispersion sans limite.¹⁶

As Heidegger returns to the Greek roots for his interpretations of words, Derrida returns to the Latin *differre*:

The action of postponing until later, of taking into account, the taking account of time and forces in an operation that implies an economic reckoning, a detour, a respite, a delay, a reserve, a representation – all the concepts that I will sum up here in a word . . . : *temporalizing*.

. . . . The other sense of 'to differ' is the most common and

most identifiable, the sense of not being identical, of being other, of being discernible, etc. And in 'differents' . . . it is necessary that interval, distance, *spacing* occur among the different elements and occur actively, dynamically, and with a certain perseverance in repetition.¹⁷

Derrida picked up this notion of the importance of repetition from Heidegger's concept of *Wiederholen*, a 'holding-for-true, as a resolute holding-oneself-free for taking back' which is an '*authentic resoluteness which resolves to keep repeating itself*'.¹⁸ Heidegger had picked up the importance of repetition from Kierkegaard's *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*. In that work Kierkegaard notes that '*repetition is a decisive expression for what "recollection" was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is a recollection, so will modern philosophy teach that the whole of life is a repetition.*'¹⁹ Each repetition is not a vicious circle, in Heidegger, going around and around in the same grove, but rather is in the form of a 'widening gyre' or a series of intersecting circles the centres of which are all moved but slightly from the previous centre. Jacques Lacan explains that 'the key to this insistence on repetition is that in its essence repetition as repetition of the symbolical sameness is impossible . . . it assures the difference only of identity – not by effect of sameness or difference but by the difference of identity.'²⁰ Repetition is not the same as recollection which is the mainstay of the metaphysical or ontotheological tradition. Kierkegaard insists on this point: 'Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards.'²¹ Each repetition encompasses most of what has previously been brought to light, and moves the entire framework forward slightly (not necessarily in a straight line), into a new field, where new things can be brought to light, and the old items restudied in light of this new understanding.

The written word is a particularly intriguing field of study, for it is not the thing itself, but rather it is something which is different, and a deferral of the direct presence of the thing itself. Derrida tells us that

the movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of

it. . . . Now this classical determination presupposes that the sign . . . is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and in view of the deferred presence one intends to reappropriate.²²

Since the written word is always involved, in interpretation, in an infinite play of differences, different meanings are endlessly deferred from the thing itself. And

if in language there are only differences with no positive terms, it is in literature that we have least cause to arrest the play of differences by calling upon a determinate communicative intention to serve as the truth or origin of the sign. We say instead that a poem can mean many things.²³

This is, of course, antipodal to the American New Critical idea that a reading can eventually be seen for every literary work. Illimitable readings and interpretations are possible through repetition which 'recollects forward' and so opens the work up to an infinite freeplay of interpretation. 'L'absence de signifié transcendantal étend à l'infini le champ et le jeu de la signification', Derrida has written.²⁴ This freeplay is double-edged: it raises the inscriptional value of literature, the poet once again prophet. It also raises the role of criticism to the creative level of the work of literature being criticised, the critic as the interpreter of signs and the holy writing.

PLAY AND GAME

The activity of writing, in its widest Derridean sense of 'production of meaning' is the game or play of the word.²⁵

'Literature' has, for the deconstructors, something of a privileged status. To read non-literary work

is to submit to a teleology, to take the text as governed by a communicative end which one reconstructs with the help of the conventions of discourse and of the relevant institution. But literature, foregrounding the text itself, gives freer play to the essential 'drift' and autonomous productivity of the language.²⁶

Therefore, the deconstructors study works by Balzac, Rousseau, de Sade, Loyola, or works about writing or the act of writing. Literature is intended to have an infinite play of deferral from the origin.

Literature is a text purposely structured or, some would say, centred. 'Structure should be centered', Derrida has written. 'But this center can be either thought, as it was classically, like a creator or being a fixed and natural place; or also as a deficiency, let's say; or something which makes possible "free play"'.²⁷ Yet the need for a centre and the search for 'a stillpoint in a changing world' is emblematic of modernist logocentrism, the ontotheological tradition that Heidegger sets out to destruct. 'The center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.'²⁸ It is precisely this 'unthinkable' structure without a centre which attracts the post-modern, post-Heideggerian-Derridean critic.

In Samuel Beckett's post-modern classic novel, *Watt*, Watt discovers a painting of a circle, broken at one point, with a point or dot painted outside of the circle.

And he wondered what the artist had intended to represent, . . . a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and its circle respectively, . . . in boundless space, in endless time, . . . and at the thought that it was perhaps this, a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time, then Watt's eyes filled with tears he could not stem.²⁹

If you have a structure, there may be boundless freeplay among the elements either outside or inside the structure, bound only by the structure, so 'the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible'.³⁰ Derrida declares on this point that 'le centre ferme aussi le jeu qu'il ouvre et rend possible. . . . Le concept de structure centrée est en effet le concept d'un jeu fonde.'³¹

Deconstruction, then, is also, if not primarily, an activity which decentres the structure and so leads to this sort of play in which there is no transcendental signified. 'This play', thought of as absence of the transcendental signified, 'is not a play *in the world*

. . . or the purposes of *containing* it'.³² Indeed, eventually there is no containment to the play in the interpretation of literature except the limitation of the critics' imagination; a limit which grows or changes with each rereading.

This is not very revolutionary; it is, in fact, similar to Wittgenstein's notion of the language-game. But R. M. White reminds us that 'we cannot divorce the use of language from its wider human context and that we must understand an utterance as "a move in the game" of human beings engaged in a common social and therefore rule-governed way of life'.³³ The deconstructors seem to wish to destruct the 'rule-governed way', and certainly divorce language 'from its wider human context' (that is, Heidegger's special use of such words as *Gerede* or *Gestimmtheit*, or Derrida's *Hymen*, *Pharmakon*, erasure and so on) and create a unique vocabulary known and used by critics of their own kind. Wittgenstein himself warns, in *Zettel*, that 'our language-game only works . . . when a certain agreement prevails'.³⁴ The vocabulary of Derridean language, as it moves in the game, through the narrow contexts, closes off, to a great extent, the same new fields it opens up.

ÉCRITURE AND TRACE: THE DERRIDEAN PRO-GRAMME

As opposed to his language, which an author inherits, and his style, which Barthes defines as a personal and subconscious network of verbal obsessions, an *écriture* or mode of writing is something an author adopts: a function he gives his language.³⁵

. . . writing thus comprehends language.³⁶

The trace is the différence which opens appearance and signification.³⁷

Throughout this exploration we have touched on some of the reasons for the Derridean valorization of *écriture* and its shadowy companion, trace or *gramme*. Let us assault these dual aspects of writing directly. Lucettie Finas defines trace or *gramme* as a

Structure de renvoi à l'autre en général (hétérogène, autrui, autre chose). N'est jamais présente(e) à une perception et ne

reconduit à aucune présence, seulement à l'écart d'une différence. Transforme et généralise le concept traditionnel d'écriture. Contrairement à une interprétation rapide du texte de Derrida, voix et parole sont aussi un tissu de traces, de grammaires, d'écarts différentiels (espacement) de rapports à l'autre.³⁸

Richard Parmer, a former student of Gadamer, explains that, to Gadamer, 'the transformation of the word into sign . . . lies at the base of science, with its idea of exact designation and unambiguous concepts'.³⁹ This would at first seem to mean that Gadamer denies the Derridean idea of the infinite play of the word as sign, the infinite play of difference and spacing. It would seem that Gadamer has himself a demystified view of writing as something which is less open to interpretation of boundless deconstruction than speech would be. Yet Gadamer himself has written that

The mode of being of literature has something unique and incomparable about it. It presents a specific problem of translation to the understanding. There is nothing so strange and at the same time so demanding as the written word. Not even the encounter with speakers of a foreign language can be compared with this strangeness, since the language of gesture and of sound always contains an element of immediate understanding. The written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but also nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind. In its deciphering and interpretation a miracle takes place: the transformation of something strange and dead into a total simultaneity and familiarity. This is like nothing else that has come down to us from the past.⁴⁰

Though Gadamer published this in *Truth and Method* two years before Derrida published the first essays of *Écriture*, this passage is decidedly Derridean – and mystical – in tone, including as it does the Derridean concept of spacing and trace, the valorisation of written language and, specifically, literature, and Heidegger's *Verstehen*. As Derrida has observed in the beginning of *Of Grammatology*, the metaphysical tradition (and Heidegger, we might add), has 'always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos: the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been . . . the

debasement of writing, and its repression of "full" speech'.⁴¹ Writing, then, is a sort of 'fuller' speech.

Literature is, as well, 'a play of traces. This play must be a sort of inscription prior to writing, a proto-writing without a present origin, without an *arché*'.⁴² 'The trace . . . becomes the origin of the origin.'⁴³ That is to say, writing which is *prelevement* or 'setting-aside, grafting, extension',⁴⁴ and trace which is the 'arche-phenomenon of "memory"',⁴⁵ are signs which uncover originary presence of being. It seems here, at least, that the originary proto-writing is almost analogous to Jung's collective unconscious: in the trace may be found the memories of the human race. Derrida finds in writing 'the violence of forgetting. Writing, a mnemotechnic means, supplanting good memory, spontaneous memory, signifies forgetfulness'.⁴⁶ Yet, though spontaneous memory would seem to be overthrown in the written sign, there must be something related to Being in the primordial race-memories of the word, for 'the *empty symbolism* of the written notation . . . exiles us far from . . . the full presence of the signified in its truth, and thus opens the possibility of crisis . . . a crisis of the logos'.⁴⁷ The trace is that shadow beyond, behind, present in the written word, which reveals, eventually, to the perceiver of the trace, the logos, once more. Thus the written word is more than a sign; Palmer tells us that 'to see words as signs is to rob them of their primordial power and make them mere instruments or designators'.⁴⁸ To perceive the originary truth of the logos is to perceive, through supplementation, extension, grafting, and the ambiguous *pharmakon* and *hymen*, the trace in which 'the (pure) trace is *différance*'.⁴⁹

We are still left with the metaphysical and Heideggerian representation of the logos as something which must be listened to, something which must be heard. Gadamer provides us with a partial escape, explaining that 'All writing is . . . a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because the meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation back is the real hermeneutical task'.⁵⁰ But perhaps even in Heidegger, whose world-experience we enter through the written word (that is, *Being and Time*), for 'after evoking "the voice of being"', Heidegger recalls that it is silent, mute, insonorous, wordless, originally a-phonetic. . . . The voice of the sources is not heard'.⁵¹ But what, or whose, is the 'voice of sources' conjured up here by Derrida?

REMYSTIFICATION: LANGUAGE AS INEFFABLE

Language is not its elaborate conventionalism, nor the burden of preschematisation with which it loads us, but the generative and creative power unceasingly to make this whole fluid.⁵²

Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God . . . is the name of indifference itself.⁵³

According to the book of Genesis, God created the earth and the surrounding universe with words, and Adam domesticated the animals of the world by naming them. The deconstructors, allegedly secular, reverse this process: by deconstructing, or, in Wallace Stevens's phrase, decreasing the world to reach logos and the Divinity. Derrida states that 'the logos is not a creative activity, the continuous full element of the divine word'.⁵⁴ But Gadamer states that 'essential inexactness can be overcome only if the mind rises to the infinite. In the infinite there is, then, only one single thing (forma) and one single word . . . namely the ineffable Word of God (*verbum Dei*) that is reflected in everything'.⁵⁵ This idea of the necessity of the mind rising to the infinite is central, of course, not only to the Derridean (or, if you prefer, Gadamerian) deconstructors, but also to all mystical thinking, such as that understanding necessarily brought to a reading of such cabalistic texts as the *Zohar*, texts which try to reduce the distance between the worshipper and the deity, texts which attempt to bring the deity forward (recollect forward) into a more *immediate* presence. Like the collective unconscious, language is, according to Palmer's reading of Gadamer, something 'finite and historical, a repository and a carrier of the experience of being which had come to language in the past'.⁵⁶ This is also the reason Jewish scholars such as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Max I. Dimont give for the reason Jews were able to survive the Diaspora and the pogroms: because the Torah and Talmud, while finite books, contain all the information ever needed for guidance no matter what historical changes or movement across the earth may come about. When Gadamer speaks of the written tradition, he is using the voice and vocabulary of a Heschel or Dimont speaking of the sanctity of studying and understanding the holy books – that is, the word of God. Gadamer, speaking of reading the written tradition, sees the act of interpret-

ing the written word as part of a great mystery of being; those inducted into the hermeneutic attitude of reading can understand the secrets beyond the words.

The remnants of the life of the past, what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves, are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition, when deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind, that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that looses and binds us. In it time and space seem to be suspended. The man who is able to read what has been handed down in writing testifies to and achieves the sheer presence of the past.⁵⁷

Each word then contains the infinite (cabbalists called this the *En Sof* – the infinite presence of the godhead contained in each thing, which is merely an aspect of the godhead), though a word is finite in itself. Interpreting the word, or reading it in the proper manner (with kavannah, say the cabbalists) is perceiving God Himself. This is the reason pious Jews wear the *tallis* and *yarmulke* when reading the holy books; according to the Pirke Avat, such reading is itself an act of prayer; perceiving the trace brings you into the immediate presence of pure mind. Thus to Derrida, reading a word is perceiving 'a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos'.⁵⁸

This opens up to the reader, according to Husserl seen through Derrida, 'the Living Present (*lebendige Gegenwart*)', which is 'the universal and absolute form of transcendental experience'.⁵⁹ This is the language of the deconstructors as demystifiers, but again cabbalistic 'bibliomancy found its justification in the assumption that the sacred Hebrew letters are not merely signs for things, but implements of divine power'.⁶⁰

These parallels are not really coerced: Heidegger and Gadamer began (and some would say, ended) as theologians, and Derrida himself has signed his essay '*Ellipse*' *Reb Derrida*, and written on Judaism in '*Edmond Jabès et la question du livre*' and in *Glas*. Derrida's translator, speaking of *Of Grammatology* asks 'Why is the opening chapter ... full of a slightly embarrassing messianic promise?'⁶¹

Someone has written that:

The secret world of the godhead is a world of language, a world of divine names that unfold in accordance with a law of their own. . . . Letters and names are not only conventional means of communication. They are far more. Each of them represents a concentration of energy and expresses a wealth of meaning which cannot be translated.⁶²

Though this passage was written by Gershom Scholem about the cabbala, it might just as easily be written by Derrida in discussing *écriture* and the understanding of words which may be derived from deconstruction: knowledge of the secret world behind the words. Paul de Man also points out that 'this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless. The hermeneutic understanding is always, by its very nature, lagging behind: to understand something is to realize that one had always known it, but, at the same time, to face the mystery of this hidden knowledge.'⁶³

It is, therefore, appropriate that Derrida begins *Of Grammatology* with a quote from the scholar Rabbi Eliezar:

If all the seas were of ink, and all ponds planted with reeds, if the sky and earth were parchments and if all human beings practised the art of writing – they would not exhaust the Torah I have learned, just as the Torah itself would not be diminished any more than is the sea by the water removed by a paint brush dipped in it.⁶⁴

Similarly, in the cabbalistic text *Zohar*, Rabbi Simeon tells us that

If a man looks upon the Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday matters, alas for him! Such a Torah, one treating with everyday concerns, and indeed a more excellent one, we too, even, we, could compile. More than that, in the possession of the rulers of the world there are books of even greater merit, and these we could emulate if we wished to compile some such Torah. But the Torah, in all of its words, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets.⁶⁵

While the post-Heideggerian deconstructors are, perhaps, the most avant-garde critics, and are certainly the most exciting and

provoking critics, their attitudes and techniques would not surprise the fourteenth-century cabbalist. While professing to 'demystify', the Derrideans continue the process of the remystification of the word Heidegger begins with his hermeneutic of the logos in *Being and Time*. This is not necessarily a negative criticism of the Derrideans, but merely a critique which perhaps replaces them within the tradition, however reluctantly.

Notes

1. This is especially true in his *Being and Time*, under the influence of Husserl's *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*.
2. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975) p. 134.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976), p. 23.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 61. Note the anthropomorphism of the word here.
5. Derrida, J. L. Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, 'Interview/Jacques Derrida: *Positions*', part 2, *Diacritics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1973) p. 40.
6. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 68.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
8. See *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), a special issue entitled *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis*. A Freudian could make much of Derrida's sexually punning terminology ('hymen', 'dissemination', and so on).
9. Jeffrey Mehlman, in his Introduction to Derrida's essay 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972) p. 74.
10. Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontails, 'Deferred Action (*Nachtraglichkeit*, *Après-coup*)', *ibid.*, pp. 182-5.
11. At the State University of New York, Binghamton, 26-9 March 1976. The conference was held under the auspices of the journal *Boundary 2*.
12. Spivak, Translator's Preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, p. lxxvii.
13. Derrida, Houdebine and Scarpetta, 'Interview/Jacques Derrida: *Positions*', part 1, *Diacritics*, vol. 2 no. 4 (1972) p. 36.
14. *Ibid.*, part 2, and Derrida and Houdebine, 'Response', *Diacritics*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1973) p. 58.
15. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds), *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, Md., 1970) p. 247.
16. Lucette Finas, 'Indecidables', in Lucette Finas et al., *Ecart: Quatre Essais a propos de Jacques Derrida* (Paris, 1973) p. 321.
17. Derrida, 'Différance', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, Ill., 1973) pp. 136, 136-7.

18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962) p. 355. Heidegger's emphasis.
19. Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie (New York, 1964) p. 33.
20. Jacques Lacan, 'Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to any Subject Whatever', in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, p. 192.
21. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 33.
22. Derrida, 'Différance', p. 138.
23. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 133.
24. Quoted by Culler, 'Structure of Ideology and Ideology of Structure', *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1973) 447.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 478.
26. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 132–3.
27. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', p. 268.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
29. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York, 1959) p. 129.
30. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', p. 248.
31. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967) pp. 409–10.
32. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50.
33. R. M. White, 'The Tractatus and the Sense of Proportions', in Godfrey Vesey (ed.), *Understanding Wittgenstein* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974) pp. 25–6.
34. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1967) paragraph 430.
35. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 134.
36. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 7.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
38. Lucette Finas, 'Indecidables', p. 321.
39. Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, Ill., 1969) p. 201.
40. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975) p. 145.
41. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 3.
42. Derrida, 'Différance', p. 146.
43. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 61.
44. 'Interview/Jacques Derrida: Positions', part 2, *Diacritics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1973) p. 37.
45. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 70.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
48. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, p. 202.
49. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 62. Derrida's emphasis.
50. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 354–5.
51. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 22.
52. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 498.
53. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 71.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
55. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 396.
56. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, p. 213.

57. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 145.
58. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 15.
59. Ibid., p. 62.
60. Louis Ginzberg, *On Jewish Law and Lore* (New York, 1970) p. 238.
61. Spivak, Translator's Preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, p. boxi.
62. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York, 1969) p. 36.
63. Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight; Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1971) p. 32.
64. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 16.
65. Gershom Scholem (ed.), *Zohar, The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York, 1975) p. 121.

11

Setzung and Übersetzung: Notes on Paul de Man RODOLPHE GASCHÉ

THE TOTAL SPEECH ACT

Why is it that literary criticism in recent years has been increasingly taken with speech act theory? What explains this paradoxical fascination with a philosophical doctrine which, in the elaboration of its theory since J. L. Austin, has excluded literary discourse as a non-serious and parasitical use of language? The question is all the more pertinent because this exclusion has never been revoked by the leading figures of this doctrine, and least of all by J. R. Searle who concludes his essay 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', by admitting that, 'there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which . . . serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions'.¹ But if literary theory's flirtation with speech act theory is here put into question, it is especially because speech act theory *de jure* pertains only to so-called normal acts of speech – that is, to the ordinary ritual, ceremonial and conventional uses of language. Since the exclusion of everything 'which falls under the etiolations of language', as Austin most forcefully expressed himself, is constitutive of the very object of speech act theory – ordinary language – as well as of the content of this theory, the results of this doctrine cannot simply be applied again to what first had to be excluded in order to make that theory possible. Speech act theory as it stands applies only to normal acts of speech, and not to a use of language which 'is parasitic upon its normal use', and in which the healthy, active, male vigour of language is drained or etiolated.² Because of the nature of what has to be excluded from the object of speech act theory, its inapplicability to literary language is not simply provisional, or a temporary defect that could one day successfully be overcome. They are ills

'which infect all utterances', which Austin keeps isolated from the thus idealised and normative object of his theory, from ordinary language.³ However, since these ills which can affect all utterances are consequently *structurally* necessary possibilities without which utterances would not be what they are, one cannot, as Derrida has argued, legitimately exclude them from their study.⁴ Once one has excluded them, one has created an aberrant object to which nothing corresponds, and from which not only no way leads back to what was eliminated, but which also excludes the possibility of such a return as a senseless undertaking. The only possible return to the rejected, say to literary language, implies a radical critique of the very idea of 'ordinary' language, of the 'normal' use of speech and, thus, of the speech act theory developed upon that fictive object.

Has literary criticism, then, once more been led by its own notorious philosophical naivety to accommodate within its domain a doctrine fundamentally alien to the object of literary studies? In order to draft the outline of an answer to this question, it will be necessary, in what follows, to determine first what that 'revolution in philosophy' consists of – 'the greatest and most salutary in its history', of which Austin pretends to be the decisive instigator.⁵ It is undoubtedly a revolution that is supposed to affect analytical philosophy, that is a philosophy which, according to Austin, is characterised by its logical aberrations. Austin's revolution in philosophy consists in restoring, through a gesture reminiscent of an empiricist inversion of platonism, the priority of real life over the abstract logical situation, and in demonstrating that the assumption by analytical philosophers that the business of language is to make statements upon facts depends on an illicit abstraction of the constative function of language from total speech act situation. With this insight, Austin is able to show that a constative utterance is subject to more outrages than mere logical contradiction, and that considerations of felicity and infelicity also affect the criteria governing the truth or falsity of statements. Since from the perspective of the total speech act, a statement, an intentional act, an act of referring are all acts of issuing utterances in speech situations, they are liable to every kind of infelicity to which other acts are also liable. The revolution in question is thus an attempt to reinscribe the linguistic functions of stating, denominating, describing, referring and so on, within the situation of the performance of those functions. This total situation of the speech act determines itself as a performative act, itself no longer referential,

but which can include within itself, as part of itself, an act of reference. The emphasis on the performative, on the locutionary act as no longer referential, but as possibly inscribing a referential act within itself – an emphasis which undoubtedly attracted the literary critic's attention to the theory of speech acts – is, however, only the first characteristic of the Austinian revolution. It is a revolution in the logical representationalism of analytical philosophy which now becomes reinscribed and determined by the more fundamental pragmatics of the linguistic act itself. The new analysis which begins with Austin has thus become conscious of the difference between what is stated and what is implied, between the function of stating and showing in the utterance of sentences.

The second aspect of Austin's revolution is intimately connected with the first, since it is linked to the introduction of the idea of what is called the total speech act. 'The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon, which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating', writes Austin.⁶ Two characteristics of the total speech act require our attention here.

1. Toward the end of the first half of *How to do Things with Words*, Austin (still trying to find a criterion that would rigorously distinguish constatives from performatives) explains why he favoured examples of performatives in the first-person singular, present indicative active: 'The "I" who is doing the action does thus come essentially into the picture. An advantage of the original first person singular active form . . . is that this implicit feature of the speech-situation is made *explicit*'.⁷

This feature is thus constitutive of the speech act as such. A speech act is characterised by its utterance by a subject in the first-person singular and in the form of the present indicative active. This implicit feature of all speech acts possesses, as Austin stresses, a very peculiar and special status. 'In particular we must notice that there is an asymmetry of a systematic kind between it and other persons and tenses of the very same verb. The fact is, this asymmetry is precisely the mark of the performative verb'.⁸ In short, then, the mark of a total speech act is that it is being enacted by a subject fully present to itself. That what constitutes the act of the speech act, what makes this act a total act, is its utterance by a self-present, although not necessarily explicit 'I'.

Austin opposes these explicit performatives to the primary performatives. Austin calls them primary rather than implicit because his ontological determination of the speech act is immediately

paralleled by a historical determination. 'Historically, from the point of view of the evolution of language, the explicit performative must be a later development than certain more primary utterances, many of which at least are already implicit performatives'.⁹

For Austin, then, the evolution of language represents the development, the unfolding of what is already implicitly contained in the original primary performatives, but which still 'preserves the "ambiguity" or "equivocation" or "vagueness" of primitive language'.¹⁰ The history of language is in effect the process of making explicit what one was in fact doing when uttering a speech act. It is 'to make plain how the action is to be taken or understood, what action it is'.¹¹ This takes place by explicitly distinguishing the different forces already contained in the primary utterance. Austin develops this theory of the history of language in order to confront what he terms the dangerous and erroneous view of the (analytical) philosophers, according to whom, 'the primary or primitive use of sentences must be, because it ought to be, *statemental* and *constative*'. And he adds: 'It seems much more likely that the "pure" statement is a goal, an ideal, toward which the gradual development of science has given the impetus, as it has likewise also toward the goal of precision.'¹²

According to this ontological and, moreover, historical determination of the total speech act, the explicit performative formula – that is, the formula in which the utterance of the speech act is named in the first-person singular present indicative active – is likewise 'only the last and most successful of numerous speech-devices'.¹³ The becoming explicit of the 'I' as the utterer of a speech act is indeed the telos of Austin's history of language.

This ontological and historical determination of the total speech act says a great deal about how the total act of speech, the performative, is to be understood. In so far as it is the act of a structurally asymmetric person, voice and tense, of a subject consequently which unlike other subjects is determined by absolute presence to itself, it is an absolute act or a pure doing. Before this act comes to mean anything particular, before this act becomes subject to rules which will lay out what the action is, it is meaningful as such, as act itself. Austin remarks that though an utterance may be void or without effect, 'this does not mean, of course, to say that we won't have done anything: lots of things will have been done'.¹⁴ What the act communicates is, first of all, itself as act. It is a fully present act of a self-asserting subject which is fully present

to itself. For language in general this means that all its achievements (like stating, communicating, meaning and so on) are only secondary, and hinge on the active performance of the speech act by a self-present, and historically prior subject.

2. The second half of *How to do Things with Words* proceeds to determine the full act of speech as an illocutionary act. Indeed, although Austin distinguishes three ways in which a speech act is an act (the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary), he attributes a special privilege to the illocutionary in his determination of the very action of the speech act. The reason why Austin favours the illocutionary over the two other modes of speech acts is first historical and contextual in nature: 'There is a constant tendency in philosophy to elide this in favour of one or other of the other two', he writes.¹⁵ But there are systematic reasons as well for this priority. Understanding these last reasons means coming to grips with Austin's revolution in philosophy. Let us first of all remark that the exclusion of the perlocutionary from the centre of Austin's investigation of the real nature of the speech act stresses the exclusively verbal nature of the speech act. It follows from this that the primary preoccupation with illocutionary acts serves to determine the speech act as an act within spoken language, since the illocutionary is said to perform an act in saying something. The illocutionary is a speech act within the act of language, and is thus supposed to be representative of the total speech act.

Austin admits that the notion of act as it appears in the three acts of speech is still unclear, and has to be met 'by a general doctrine about action'; but he will not deliver such a general theory about action in *How to do Things with Words*. Yet, by privileging, in his analysis, the illocutionary act as an act *within* language, Austin implicitly reveals the fundamentals of such a general theory. Not only does Austin favour the illocutionary act in his attempt to define the nature of the total speech act, he also recognises a 'natural break' between the illocutionary act and its consequences, a break which is missing in the case of physical acts which are '*in pari materia* with at least many of . . . [their] immediate and natural consequences'.¹⁶ All this only adds to the consolidation of the speech act as *essentially a non-physical act of language affecting itself*. To perform an illocutionary act is to perform an act in saying something. The illocutionary force indicators which make a speech act an act are indicators that come to reflect within the act of speech

the conditions, implications, presuppositions, circumstances and so on of this very act. If the illocutionary act is to be representative of the total speech act, then it must be said that Austin understands the act as essentially an involuted one, an act of language folding back upon itself.

If in saying what I was doing in saying something, I perform an illocutionary act, then that act is basically an act by which language comes to reflect upon itself. Austin's revolution thus consists in the reintroduction of the notion of self-reflection and self-referentiality into the analytical discourse which had completely eliminated this dimension of language from its considerations. From the perspective of analytical philosophy, Austin's move is undoubtedly a revolution. To the contemporary reader, however, or to a reader familiar with the development of continental philosophy, this revolution must be suspect for many reasons, not only because it is, interestingly enough, a revolution in terms of self-reflection, but also because of the amazing lack of historical comprehension, a lack which ordinary language philosophy shows when it speaks of a revolution.¹⁷ The fact that Austin does not employ the philosophical terminology of reflexivity to describe his so-called revolution is only one sign of this lack. However, literary critics, who in the aftermath of New Criticism have rediscovered the romantic idea of the self-reflexivity of the inner form of the work of art, have immediately recognised the relation of speech act theory to the problematics of reflexivity. This, then, also explains why speech act theory could exert the influence on literary criticism we have referred to. Linguists conscious of philosophical traditions like Émile Benveniste, or more recently philosophers like François Récanati, have doubted that what Austin's revolution reintroduces into the philosophy of language was nothing more and nothing less than the classical problem of the reflexivity of language.

Benveniste in his article entitled '*La philosophie analytique et le langage*', after having identified the performative utterance as an act that has the property of always being a unique event, since it is an act of authority by a subject possessing that qualification, writes:

Since the performative is effectively uttered within conditions that make it an act, this leads to recognizing that the performative possesses the particular property of being self-referential, of referring to a reality which it constitutes itself. This implies that it

is simultaneously a linguistic manifestation, since it needs to be uttered, and a fact of reality insofar as it is the accomplishment of an act. The act is thus identical to the utterance of the act. . . . An utterance which becomes its own referent is self-referential.¹⁸

Indeed the two moments which contribute to Austin's revolution in philosophy, the subject-character of the speech act, and its determination as an act within the act of language, determine the performative as a self-reflexive or self-referential act. 'An utterance is performative', writes Benveniste, 'insofar as it denominates the performed act. . . . A performative utterance must name the performance of speech as well as the performer.'¹⁹ Both conditions are fulfilled by the speech act's self-reflexivity.

Récanati in *La transparence et l'énonciation*, after retracing the Austinean problematics back to the determination of the linguistic sign in the philosophy of Port-Royal, and ultimately to Descartes, has been able to demonstrate that Austin's revolution is in fact a return to the problems of enunciation debated in classical philosophy. Indeed, if in the total speech act the illocutionary force indicator – that is, the reflexive indicator – signifies *that an utterance signifies, before signifying what it signifies*, and if this recognition of the factum of signification is the condition of possibility for the recognition of the dictum of the utterance, then the performative prefix of the utterance is analogous to the Cartesian cogito which must accompany all cogitations. The reflection which an utterance makes upon itself is the very condition of that utterance's possibility of referring. Moreover:

An idea is only a sign of its object if it represents this object as an object of representation different from representation itself. The idea must represent its object as different from the idea, and, consequently, the idea must be reflected in the representation which it undertakes of the object. It must be different from the object represented in this way. The necessary difference between what serves to represent and what is represented must be reflected in representation itself.²⁰

An utterance achieves the difference necessary to its referring function by reflecting upon the factum of its utterance. Since there is no referring function without such a self-reflection of the act of enunciation, this self-reflexivity appears to be the very essence of the total speech act. And it is indeed Austin's achievement to have

reminded the logicians of analytical philosophy of the classical problem of the sign, and thus of the conditions of possibility of enunciation. The generalisation of the performative in the second part of *How to do Things with Words* is, then, a generalisation of reflexivity, a generalisation which intrinsically determines what Austin understood by his notion of a total speech act, as well as by his notion of act as such.

Literary criticism's temptation for speech act theory must thus be explained by this theory's concern with reinscribing operations like stating, referring or describing back into the total speech act, and depriving them, in this manner, of their hitherto 'unique position over the matter of being related to facts in a unique way called being true or false'.²¹ But above all, literary criticism has been fascinated with speech act theory because of the role it lends to the voice of the utterer, and because of its recognition of the necessarily self-reflexive nature of the linguistic act as a whole. But what literary criticism forgets is that the particular rules set up by this theory pertain only to the analysis of ordinary language, that is to a purely theoretical construct and ideal object, that precludes all fictional use of language – and that this exclusion can only be cancelled at the price of annulling the rules and distinctions set forth by this theory.

DETOTALISING TRANSLATIONS

But what about a work like Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*,²² which seems to rely heavily on the terminology developed by Austin? Is it an attempt to apply the categories of speech act theory to the literary text? And is de Man's work then prey to the same philosophical naïvety of which literary criticism was accused in the previous section? To answer these questions, it will be necessary first to try to assess the project of *Allegories*. From the outset let us, however, underline some of the difficulties which any reading of this work encounters. Apart from the complex and involuted movements of the essays collected in *Allegories*, any attempt, like this one, to outline the theoretical parameters they have in common not only encounters the difficulty and the richness of these essays, but finds obstacles of a more fundamental nature. These obstacles are consequent upon the status of the leading concepts of de Man's critical enterprise, because the way in which they regu-

late his analysis excludes a rigorous development of a unified theory that would underlie all the essays of *Allegories*. Indeed, the rigour of de Man's critical endeavour manifests itself in precisely the subversion of what may be misunderstood as a series of key terms. How does this blurring of the theoretical concepts of *Allegories* come into effect? As will soon become clear, de Man subjects his theoretical apparatus to the results of his analyses with the result that all his leading concepts become temporalised in a narrative scheme. Or to put it differently, all of de Man's concepts are allegorised, the concept of allegory being no exception. For this reason it appears structurally impossible to make de Man's theoretical enterprise close upon itself.

Allegories sets out as an attempt to overcome the traditional antithesis characteristic of the business of literary criticism, the antithesis of referentialism and formalism, as it figures, in particular, in the opposition between traditional criticism and New Criticism. Rhetorical reading is the name for an approach intended to unlock the rigid opposition between referentialism and formalism, between realism and a criticism centred around the self-reflexivity of the literary form, between thematic and aesthetic criticism. What is a rhetorical reading? It certainly is not an attempt to classify the tropes distinguished by classical rhetoric, which are to be found in literary works. Nor is it simply a reading of the effects of persuasion produced by literary language as an active performance touching the reader. What de Man names 'rhetoric' is precisely the gap that becomes apparent in the pedagogical and philosophical history of the term – that is, between rhetoric as a system of tropes and rhetoric as persuasion (p. 131). 'Rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion or – which is not quite the same thing – of cognitive and performative language', writes de Man (p. ix). In this section, we will try to determine carefully rhetoric as such a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion, leaving the discussion of rhetoric as disruptive intertwining of cognitive and performative language to the next section.

The essay 'Semiology and Rhetoric' first determines the rhetorical as that figural potentiality of language which in a text suspends the possibility of deciding whether its grammatical structure conveys literal or figural meaning, proper meaning or the improper meaning of the tropes of classical or semiological rhetoric. In other words, the rhetorical on which a rhetorical reading of texts rests is what causes a text to remain suspended between the claim to

univocity, referentiality, truth, logicity and so on, and what from the perspective of traditional philosophy and literary criticism appears secondary and derived, that is, the tropes and figures of speech as classified by traditional rhetoric. Since the rhetorical is what simultaneously invalidates a grammatical or logical reading of texts and a reading according to which a text would only feature a figural meaning, a rhetorical reading necessarily presupposes a 'rhetorical model of the trope' as much as the subjection of both the grammatical or logical and the figural dimensions of texts to rhetorical structures. How is the rhetorical model of the trope different from the trope of classical rhetoric and from the concept regulating philosophical discourse or the discourse of literary criticism? Because a rhetorical reading of a text proceeds by demonstrating that (a) the figural potential of language is disruptive of grammatical univocity, and conversely that (b) the grammatical or conceptual rigour of texts is disruptive of what de Man calls 'rhetorical mystification', the rhetorical model of the trope appears as the figure of disruption of both the classical trope and the concept of logic. It is this gap, 'the aporia between trope and persuasion', between trope and concept which the rhetorical model of the trope comes to 'bridge': Yet before investigating the precise nature of this 'bridging' we must clarify first what the rhetorical model of the trope disrupts, or more accurately, why the trope of traditional rhetoric and the concept of logic can be disrupted. Rhetorical mystification, as well as the effects of the concept, are the result of the totalising function of these instances. The trope of rhetoric and the concept both serve to totalise, to subjugate, to synthesise. Both grammatical univocity (the concept, the referent, the value and so on) and the trope of rhetoric (the figure of speech, the image and so on) are constitutive of the same metaphysical valorisations. A rhetorical reading, then, sets out to explore the mechanics of grammar as well as of traditional rhetoric, the machinery that produces the effects of univocity and totality. In the case of the trope of rhetoric, its totalising effect is dependent on the mechanics of the impersonal imprecision of grammar. On the other hand, the trope of rhetoric appears to be constitutive of grammatical univocity, of the subsuming and totalising function of the concept of logic. Three things can already be established at this point: (a) since a rhetorical reading is an investigation into the mechanics of totalisation of both the image and the concept, it will try to account for both the possibility and the ultimate impossibility

of the effect of totalisation; (b) since it tries to determine 'the rhetorical patterns that organize the distribution and the movement of key terms in literary texts . . . contending that questions of valorization can be relevantly considered only after the rhetorical status of the text has been clarified', a rhetorical reading leaves the fallacies of traditional oppositions (for example, the 'literary', the 'philosophical', the 'political' and so on) behind 'by accounting, at least to some degree, for their predictable occurrence' (p. 258); and (c) since the rhetorical reading aims at debunking the totalising function of trope and concept, far from having the pretension of being itself a totalising reading, it is also systematically suspicious of everything that would turn again into a totalising approach, such as thematic or aesthetic readings.

It would be all too time-consuming to review the mechanics of totalisation in all the various instances specified by de Man: the concept, judgement, the self, identity, genetic totality, images of self-reflection, specular figures and so on. In contesting what he calls 'the authority of metaphorical systems' (p. 239), de Man demonstrates that by bridging oppositions, by setting up 'seductive similarities where they do not exist' (p. 239), by performing 'analogical, metaphorical substitutions' (p. 122) and so on, all these instances produce rhetorical mystifications or 'aberrant totalizations' (p. 237). All these operations share something which is characteristic of the metaphoric process. And, indeed, metaphor, for de Man, is the totalising instance *par excellence*. Metaphor is to be understood here according to its classical definition as it appears in theories of rhetoric from Aristotle to R. Jakobson, as 'an exchange or substitution of properties on the basis of resemblance' (p. 146). Yet the resemblance which seems to have been 'made possible by a proximity or an analogy so close and intimate that it allows the one to substitute for the other without revealing the difference necessarily introduced by the substitution' (p. 62) is not only a foreclosure of this ineluctable difference, it is in addition, and in particular, a 'way to disguise difference' (p. 16) between the poles of the metaphoric exchange. In this levelling of differences, metaphor proceeds by subjugation of difference as such. Hence the totalising – and in fact conceptualizing – power characteristic of 'the totalizing stability of metaphorical processes' (p. 63). Metaphor by instauring totalities in this manner 'can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent' (p. 47). This definition of metaphor, according to which the

exchange or substitution of properties on the basis of resemblance takes place in order to secure totalisations, syntheses, conceptual subjections and so on, implies an understanding of metaphor in terms of 'metaphorical synechdoche'. Indeed, a metaphor presupposes, when it substitutes one property for another on the basis of resemblance, a 'necessary link' or an 'organic link', between the poles of the exchange. Because they are thought to be similar, all the interchangeable terms become parts of one whole. All metaphorical systems are totalities precisely because the positing of resemblance between the terms erases their difference, and thus raises them to the status of exchangeable parts of a whole. Since the relation which exists between parts is one of mutual resemblance, and since this resemblance binds them necessarily into a whole, the relation in question is organic, a link, as de Man argues, which is endowed with attributes of naturalness. This, consequently, allows the principle of metaphorical totalisation itself to be equated with a natural process. Hence the alleged superiority of metaphor over metonymy, of the grammatical over the rhetorical, of the philosophical over the literary, and so on.

The rhetorical reading which de Man presents is thus a reading which traces the numerous totalising mystifications of philosophy and literary criticism, of thematic and aesthetic criticism back to their ultimate source: the figure of metaphor. But how does a rhetorical reading itself avoid falling prey to the gesture and the temptation of totalisation? Let us recall that a rhetorical reading is first and foremost a reading which shows how the grammatical, conceptual, thematic totalisations of a text are being deconstructed by the images, the tropes, the rhetoric of the text.

Before pursuing this point it is necessary to remark from the outset that while de Man admits in the preface to *Allegories* to have borrowed the term 'deconstruction' from the work of Derrida, he uses this term in an altogether different way than Derrida. Indeed, if one does not pay attention to this difference, one runs the risk of missing the originality of de Man's use of this term, as well as those moments where Derrida's and de Man's work border upon each other. For the moment, suffice it to say that de Man differs from Derrida where he applies the notion of deconstruction, and that his work is closest to Derrida where this philosopher's name is not mentioned at all. In order to clarify some of these seemingly enigmatic points, let us also focus in what follows on the technicalities of the procedure of deconstruction as used by de Man.

A rhetorical reading provides an insight into the mechanics of the thematic strata of a text, and thus deconstructs, as de Man says, the totalisations characteristic of those strata. With this deconstruction, texts become, in de Man's words, 'unreadable'. If to read is to understand a text, and if to understand means thematically, aesthetically or conceptually to totalise a text, then the production of insights into the mechanics of the text will certainly render that text opaque and unreadable. But the answer to the question whether such a rhetorical reading which folds the text back upon itself is not just another totalising gesture through which the unreadability of a text becomes readable again shows that a rhetorical reading does not yet come to rest with the demystification of the thematic and conceptual metaphorisations. Undoubtedly, as soon as the rhetorical structure of a poem or piece of literature has served to debunk the mystifications specific to the thematic level of the text, it turns immediately into a new unifying principle. The totality that it confers upon the text is no longer one rooted in logos, but a totality rooted in *lexis* (p. 45). Consequently, to deconstruct does not simply mean to escape the possibility of error and illusion distinctive of literature in general. Discussing the deconstruction of self in *On Lie and Truth*, de Man argues that to prove that the self is a metaphor only raises the lie to

a new figural power, but it is nonetheless a lie. By asserting in the mode of truth that the self is a lie, we have not escaped from deception. We have merely reversed the usual scheme which derives truth from the convergence of self and the other by showing that the fiction of such a convergence is used to allow for the illusion of self-hood to originate. (p. 112)

Through the deconstruction of a rhetorical mode like the self, 'we may have changed the rhetorical mode, but we certainly have not escaped from rhetoric' (p. 112). Not only does the deconstruction of the self remain deceptive, it may even become the very recuperation of subjectivity and of self-affirmation. 'Within the epistemological labyrinth of figural structures, the recuperation of self-hood . . . [can] be accomplished by the rigor with which the discourse deconstructs the very notion of the self' (p. 173). Through a dialectical reversal, the authority of the self may be transferred to the authority of interpretation or of deconstruction. When de Man notes that the transformation by the hermeneutical

process of 'the total insignificance, the nothingness of the self into a new center of meaning is a very familiar gesture in contemporary thought, the ground of what is abusively called modernity', it is obvious that he has as much the performances of so-called deconstructive criticism in mind as the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Ricoeur, which are referred to in the context (pp. 173–4). The very rigour with which the rhetorical is opposed to the grammatical and by means of which the thematic levels of a text are being deconstructed, leads to a reassertion of values which are as deceptive as those deconstructed. Thus, for instance, the debunked referentiality of a text reappears as the self-referentiality of the deconstructive reading. The reason why this return cannot be prevented is that 'the notion of a language entirely freed of referential constraints is properly inconceivable'. Consequently, a 'relapse from a rhetoric of figuration into a rhetoric of signification', is inevitable (p. 49). Yet, such a 'failure of figuration', the failure to dislodge all the referential constraints from a text, is not simply a failure. Indeed, the relapse of the rhetoric of figuration, or of rhetorical reading into the referential, into meaning and truth, represents the deconstruction of the totality rooted in lexis, to which all rhetorical reading is prone. De Man notes: 'The failure of figuration thus appears as the undoing of the unity it claimed to establish between the semantic function and the formal structure of language' (p. 54). Thanks to this 'deconstruction to the second degree' which demystifies the totality to which even a rhetorical reading falls prey, it becomes manifest that for de Man literary or poetic language is a language which denounces and disrupts all possible totalizations, those of figurative language included. A rhetorical reading is then, *secondly*, a reading which also deconstructs the totalising effects of the rhetorical dimension of a text. By virtue of this 'denunciation of the ultimate figure', of the totalising figure which a rhetorical reading projects onto a text, poetical language, at the very moment 'it asserts itself in the plenitude of its promise', circumvents all possible recuperation in the form of thematic or aesthetic statements about itself, in the form of any knowledge it may confer about itself. Poetical language is, indeed, nothing 'but the advent of the disruption' of its self (p. 56).

The two readings: grammatical or rhetorical, logical or poetic, and so on, are two equally valid readings, although they are entirely incompatible. This is so because a literary text is always both thematic and the simultaneous deconstruction of that themat-

ism, since in producing those thematic effects it is dependent on rhetorical and syntactical devices.

The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place. A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode. (p. 17).

However, this process, characteristic of the literary text, does not come to a halt with the simultaneous assertion and denial of its own rhetorical mode, with the deconstruction of its own deconstruction, or more accurately, with the deconstruction of the totalising effects of the deconstruction to the first degree.

The wisdom of the text is self-deconstructive, . . . but this self-deconstruction is infinitely displaced in a series of successive rhetorical reversals which, by the endless repetition of the same figure, keep it suspended between truth and the death of this truth. A threat of immediate destruction, stating itself as a figure of speech thus becomes the permanent repetition of this threat. Since this repetition is a temporal event, it can be narrated sequentially, but what it narrates, the subject matter of the story, is itself a mere figure. A non-referential, repetitive text narrates the story of a literally destructive but non-tragic linguistic event. (pp. 115–16)

In other words, the process of self-deconstruction constitutive of the literary text is an endless process in which all deconstructions turn into retotalisations which consequently need to be deconstructed again. Such deconstructions to the second degree, deconstructions of the unifying effects of the prior deconstructions, take place through precisely these retotalisations.

This may be the appropriate moment to clarify de Man's notion of deconstruction. From everything we have sought to establish, it should be obvious by now that deconstruction is for de Man primarily an undoing of logical and figural totalisations of all sorts, totalisations which are characteristic of both the thematic and aesthetic strata of texts, and on which the respective approaches to the text are based. The deconstructions of these various totalisations take place either by those textual strata on which the logical and figural totalisations have to rely in order to come into being, or

through the relapse of the equally totalising deconstructive readings into what they were supposed to overcome. Such a conception of deconstruction hinges on an understanding of the text as deconstructing its own metaphors – that is its own totalising images, such as, for instance, scenes of reading or writing (p. 72). Deconstruction, then, is essentially the undoing of all thematic readings which dismiss the structure of the text and fall into the trap of the text's totalising images. It is in addition the undoing of all aesthetic readings of texts, since 'aesthetic generality is the precondition for resemblance which also means that it is constitutive of metaphor', that is of totality (p. 183). This deconstruction takes place as an endless process – there are deconstructions to the second, third and so forth, degree – paradoxically, because of their constant (deconstructive) relapse into the thematic.

As we have seen, deconstruction proceeds by playing out the mechanics constitutive of the logical, figural, thematic and aesthetic totalizations against these totalising effects. In his discussion of Rousseau's *Social Contract* de Man remarks that

The deconstruction of a system of relationships, always reveals a more fragmented stage that can be called natural with regard to the system that is being undone. Because it also functions as the negative truth of the deconstructive process, the 'natural' pattern authoritatively substitutes its relational system for the one it helped to dissolve. In doing so it conceals the fact that it is itself one system of relations among others, and it presents itself as the sole and true order of things, as nature and not as structure. But since a deconstruction always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities, nature turns out to be a self-deconstructive term. It engenders endless other 'nature' in an eternally repeated pattern of regression. Nature deconstructs nature. . . . Far from denoting a homogeneous mode of being, 'nature' connotes a process of deconstruction redoubled by its own fallacious retotalization. (p. 249)

Hence, the direction of deconstruction is that of a regression along and in total conformity to the hierarchical priorities of metaphysics. By analogy with a Nietzschean reversal, deconstruction turns the priorities of the philosophical discourse upside down while keeping the relation which exists between these hierarchical

terms entirely intact. This is why it can be said to be a regression. By restoring in a negative manner the values of metaphysics, by retotalising that by means of which it has deconstructed metaphysics, deconstruction becomes endowed with attributes of naturalness. It appears as a return to the primitive, the original, the archaic. But even these fallacious retotalisations of deconstruction will not withstand the final negative thrust of deconstruction, which will lay bare the hidden articulations and fragmentations that preceded its own retotalisation.

Such an endless process in which deconstructions are critical of textual totalisations, totalisations which yield deconstructions to the second (or third) degree since they turn again into new totalisations, corresponds to the process of the endless (self-) reflection characteristic of the literary text. It is a reflection by means of which the literary text unremittingly undoes the threat of being a self, a totality. But in order to achieve this goal, the text has constantly to become its own referent, the very object of its own reflection. A text like Rousseau's *Julie*, for instance, despite disclaiming all referentiality is a portrait of its own deconstruction of referentiality, and thus restores, although in a negative way, its referentiality. The pathos of desire, that is of figural language (of language without an outside referent), 'stabilizes the semantics of the figure by making it "mean" the pathos of its undoing' (p. 199). The text becomes self-referential; it comes to know itself as the object of its own cognition. It is self-reflexive. What does this then imply for the concept of deconstruction? What does a deconstruction achieve when it undoes, say, selfhood as metaphor? It replaces, says de Man, selfhood 'by the knowledge of its figural and epistemologically unreliable structure' (p. 187). This negative knowledge is deconstruction. In other words, deconstruction is, according to de Man, 'the negative insight' into the misleading assumptions and effects of metaphor and concept. Deconstruction amounts to the epistemological gesture of falsifying the pretensions to truth and completeness of all totalising principles and the approaches rooted in these principles. Deconstruction utters these negative insights about the unifying instances. Therefore it is an act of understanding, of judging (and as such an operation of totalisation). Consequently deconstruction belongs to the cognitive strata of a text, it is part of its cognitive rhetoric. In other words, deconstruction is a knowledge about a text's referential constraints, and belongs to the text's referential mode. It is a knowledge about the mechanics of

knowledge, a knowledge destructive of knowledge, but a knowledge none the less. What makes this negative knowledge different from knowledge in the first place is, however, that it is an invitation to debunk endlessly and in an infinite process the totalisations of knowledge, its own included. Since 'deconstructive labour' has to start all over again as soon as the deconstructive operation has taken place, instead of closing upon itself as upon a final negative insight, it turns into a boundless process precisely because it is still an insight.

To sum up, let us say, that for de Man deconstruction amounts to negative cognition. The referent of this negative knowledge is the text itself – that is, the text's rhetorical and syntactical structures, its form and so on as the mechanics which invalidate its referential mode. The negative object to which deconstruction as a mode of cognition regresses confers 'attributes of (natural) existence' upon the object (p. 240). Yet, what already distinguishes this definition of deconstruction from that used by most of the so-called deconstructive criticism – Derrida's work being, of course, excluded from this newest brand of literary criticism – which it seems so well to describe, is not only its rigour, but, especially, the fact that deconstruction for de Man is bound to question endlessly its relapse into referentiality, into meaning, into the authority of its own hermeneutical performance, into the illusions of subjectivity which it confers, and so forth; whereas so-called deconstructive criticism is comfortably installed within the absolute security and certainty of its (negative) insights. But the differences between de Man's notion of deconstruction and that of deconstructive literary criticism are even more decisive.²³

In order to emphasise these differences, and hence the originality of de Man's approach, let us first ask the question whether a thematic and a non-thematic or rhetorical reading, both of which are equally valid though incompatible, can be reunified 'into a single totality' in which the differences of the two approaches could be sublated (p. 13). What could such a totality be? Could it be the result of the reversals that take place in a text between thematic and non-thematic, between 'constructive' and deconstructive strata? Since 'all rhetorical structures . . . are based on substitutive reversals', a deconstruction in a text, as 'one more such reversal that repeats the self-same rhetorical structure', may be thought to be united with what it undoes in 'the cross-shaped reversal of properties that rhetoricians call chiasmus' (p. 113). Is this figure

which crosses all the orders of a text – this 'chiasmus, the crossing that reverses the attributes of words and things' (p. 38), the chiasm of the figural potential of language – is this the centre of the text? Can a 'poetics of chiasmus' (p. 49) hope to retotalise the disjunctive readings as well as the different strata of the text? A certain deconstructive criticism certainly tries to do so, all the more as it does not question (nor further deconstruct) the implications of its notion of deconstruction as a negative knowing, a mode of understanding, that is of totalizing, the negative. But immediately the following question arises. If, as de Man has argued, the process of reversals which characterises the text as an endless process, if rhetorical readings challenge without end their own inevitable relapse into totalisation, how then could 'the original chiasmus' (p. 43) and the intricacy and wealth of the movements triggered by it, make the text close upon itself? The chiasmus, for de Man, despite being the figure of exchange *par excellence*, the figure of all totalising figures, is itself no instance of totalisation.

Apart from this infinite process of deconstruction which prevents the figure of chiasmus from transforming itself into a totalising device, it has to be noticed that the cross-shaped figure of rhetorical reversal is not a symmetric figure. De Man writes: 'The reversal from denial to assertion implicit in the deconstructive discourse never reaches the symmetrical counterpart of what it denies. . . . The negative thrust of the deconstruction remains unimpaired' (pp. 125–6).

This explains then why a deconstruction does not come to rest with the inversion of values which it undertakes. Since the negative knowledge conferred by deconstruction 'fails to achieve a concluding exchange that would resolve the tension of the original dejection' (p. 187) by the deconstruction of metaphysical values, 'the totalizing symmetry of the substitutive pattern is thrown out of balance' (p. 185). Indeed, as soon as a totalising identification of the text is about to occur, as soon as more embracing concepts seem to sublate the disjunctive terms and approach a new higher totality, the negative thrust of the reversal comes into effect again. The play of the text is without end.

Thus, although any reading of the text, as far as it is a text, must 'start out by undoing the simple antithetical relationship between referent and figure, this does not mean however that it can stop there' (p. 200). A rhetorical reading has to go beyond this pseudosymmetry, and to explore the asymmetrical thrust of the

text. It has to go beyond the play of reversal between 'construction' and deconstruction toward a thinking of the unflaggingly negative and disruptive thrust of detotalisation characteristic of deconstruction. But before doing so, another question arises. Considering the asymmetrical nature of the text and the endless process of deconstruction that distinguishes it, one may wonder if a text is 'the allegorical narrative of its own deconstruction?' With this question de Man aims at 'the possibility of including the contradictions of reading in a narrative that would be able to contain them. Such a narrative would have the universal significance of an allegory of reading' (p. 72). The unity de Man refers to cannot be a unity provided by metaphorical *synechdoche*. On the contrary, from everything seen, it must be a unity due to the undoing of metaphor. Since this process is itself an infinite one, the unity in question must be temporal, a narrative which would include the mutually deconstructive play of the two readings distinguished, as well as the totalising principles which structure these readings. Needless to say, in order to understand the nature of this temporal totality, it is imperative to come to grips with de Man's use of the term 'allegorical'.

It may be difficult to demarcate allegory from the structure of metaphor, 'of which it is in fact the most general version'. But precisely 'by generalizing itself in its own allegory, the metaphor seems to have displaced its proper meaning' in the figure of allegory (p. 73). This is what de Man proceeds to demonstrate in the chapter entitled 'Reading'. The displacement of the proper meaning of metaphor in its generalised figure of allegory becomes manifest in the allegorical stress on details that deflect the allegory's potential resemblance.

In a metaphor, the substitution of a figural for a literal designation engenders, by synthesis, a proper meaning that can remain implicit since it is constituted by the figure itself. But in allegory . . . it seems that the author has lost confidence in the effectiveness of the substitutive power generated by resemblance: he states a proper meaning, directly or by way of an intra-textual code or tradition, by using a literal sign which bears no resemblance to that meaning and which conveys, in its turn, a meaning that is proper to it but does not coincide with the proper meaning of allegory. (p. 74)

Consequently *allegoresis* is a process in which signification does not happen via substitutions along the line of resemblances, that is it is not a metaphorical process. The proper meaning of the allegory is linked to a literal sign 'which bears no resemblance to that meaning'. This literal sign, in turn, has a proper meaning which differs completely from that of its allegorical meaning: 'the allegorical representation leads toward a meaning that diverges from the initial to the point of foreclosing its manifestation' (p. 75). It follows from this that allegorical representation deflects the reader's or the beholder's attention from the proper meaning of the allegory to the proper meaning of the details which support the first meaning. Such a side-tracking is made possible by the fact that a detail in an allegory has no resemblance to what it is supposed to mean. De Man remarks that, 'the relationship between the proper and the literal meaning of the allegory . . . is not merely a relationship of non-coincidence. The semantic dissonance goes further' (p. 74). Indeed, as de Man demonstrates in an argument too complex to summarise, 'the two meanings fight each other with the blind power of stupidity' (p. 76). The endless repetition of this struggle turns the allegory into an open figure, into a figure of non-closure – a figure which is no longer a figure. Since the allegory is characterised by such a repetition 'of a potential confusion between figural and referential statement' – 'potential, because the confusion never quite takes place', since the potential confusion is only displaced in the temporal process of the fight of the two meanings – allegory is a figure of an endless displacement of its potential closing effect as figure (p. 118). It is a totality displaced in time, the narration of a totality which never quite takes place. It is a totality propelled towards an impossible closure. Therefore de Man calls it ironic allegory. Allegory determined along these lines is always the allegory of a figure, this figure being the totalising figure of metaphor. Allegory, then, is a disfigured metaphor whose totalising potential is metonymically laid out (and thus subverted) in an endless process of narrative. The allegory is what permanently disrupts the totality specific of the figure of metaphor. This disruption, or irony, 'is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding' (p. 301).

No wonder, then, if de Man will take advantage of the 'sup-

plementary figural superposition' of the non-figure of allegory to account for the complex structures of literary texts, in which the movement between deconstruction and restauration, between the referential constraints and the narrative, between reading and writing, and so on, produces a fundamental unreadability. Precisely because the deconstruction of metaphorical figures remains a necessary moment in the production of these intricate textual structures, their rhetorical mode 'can no longer be summarized by the single term of metaphor or of any substitutive trope or figure in general' (p. 205). It is the allegory of figure which stands for this impossible totalisation of the structures of what is called a text.

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we call such narratives to the second (or third) degree allegories. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives . . . tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference of degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor, and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading. (p. 205)

Because the allegory is an ironic figure, a figure of non-closure, of temporal displacement of a would-be totality, it can come to summarise (yet without summarising) the movement and the structure characteristic of a text. Since the tropological deconstruction is a process which never comes to a stop, because of the relapse of deconstruction into figure, it is a narrative. The allegorical narrative narrates the impossibility of totalising the narrative of deconstruction. Since deconstruction is a process of negative insight into the impossibility of understanding, the allegory becomes the narrative of this subverted operation, supposing that it is an operation of totalisation. Allegorical narrative consequently escapes all epistemological grip.

'Textual coherence' (p. 77), 'the stability of the text' (p. 72), grounds itself in the non-figure of allegory as the narrative of the text's deconstructions. The allegory is both what holds the two

readings which we distinguished together, and what prevents them from merging in the permanent displacement of their potential synthesis. But this allegory is only the allegory of 'the crossing or chiasmus, of the two modes of reading'. But what about 'Reading itself', what about 'the allegorical representation of Reading which we . . . understand to be the irreducible component of any text?' If a text is always as a narrative the allegory of its own reading (or, rather, of necessarily incompatible readings), a text also, necessarily, contains a 'statement' about Reading itself. From the nature of the text as the narrative of its mutually exclusive readings, it follows that this statement can only take the form of an allegory of Reading. It is a figure which states the unreadability – that is, the impossibility of conceptualising Reading as such. The allegory of Reading is thus a 'statement' about the structural obstacles which a text mounts against all attempts to comprehend it as a whole.

All that will be represented in such an allegory will deflect from the act of reading and block access to its understanding. The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading. But this impossibility necessarily extends to the word 'reading' which is thus deprived of any referential meaning whatsoever. (p. 77)

It is 'forever impossible to read Reading', asserts de Man. This impossibility is not only the outcome of the temporal dimension of the allegory of Reading, but also of the logic of allegory, which deflects from its proper meaning as a figure to its literal meanings, that is to the irreducibly opposed readings. But, more importantly, this impossibility of comprehending Reading itself, an impossibility which entails the allegorisation of the concept of allegory, the becoming narrative of the concept of narrative, is what makes that Reading appear as the deflection of the deflection characteristic of allegory. Reading cannot be read because it is deflection itself. The allegory of Reading consequently stands for the impossibility of reading that which makes reading forever impossible. It stands for the impossibility of understanding what forever subverts understanding as an act of totalisation.

At this point it should become obvious that all of de Man's concepts are drawn without exception into a maelstrom of temporalisation. A concept, in de Man's work, becomes the narrative of its own impossible closure upon what it subsumes. Time prevents the

conceptual atoms from exercising their epistemological grip, their totalising work by preventing them from closing upon themselves. But something else can be brought to attention here: the fact that the detotalised figure of the allegory grounds the stability of a text in the temporal succession of its moments alone. The allegory, the figure of non-closure, summarises the moments of a text solely as their temporal unrolling. What does this imply? It implies that the allegory does not bridge the gap between successive moments, as little as it bridges the gap between the terms of any opposition. This refusal to bridge the gap between dyadic poles, or successive moments of a text, characterises allegory as the most radical dislodging of metaphor. Could one say that metonymic deconstruction is thus linked in a systematic manner to a metaleptic deconstruction of temporal categories such as those of anteriority and posteriority? In any case, this refusal to bridge gaps is a refusal of translation. In a development concerning Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, de Man reminds us that the operation of bridging dyadic oppositions, or oppositions in which one term is temporally or logically prior to the other, is an act of translation. Nietzsche, indeed, speaks of 'übersetzen' and 'überbrücken' (p. 101). The act of translating corresponds to the seminal act of *epiphora*, constitutive of the totalising figure of metaphor. To refuse translation is to reassert the difference of the terms caught in opposition, as well as the difference of terms in sequential unfoldings. Needless to say, this reassertion of difference in the temporality of narrative thoroughly affects the notion of narrative itself. Consequently what does it mean for de Man in the various readings of *Allegories* to retranslate metaphorical illustrations and conceptual theories into linguistic facts, totalisations of all kinds into rhetorical potentialities of the signifier, psychological constructions into the absolute randomness of language, and so on? These retranslations are detranslations – that is, operations by means of which the static and closed-off instances of totality are referred back to the 'original' mechanics of the text. These detranslations are attempts at ungrounding the instances of totality by tying them up with the 'original' deflection of the text. A text from this perspective represents the temporal process of detotalising operations, of detranslations of totalising translations or metaphorical substitutions. Within a text there is no translation from one moment to another. A text is constituted by the repetitive deferral of its translation.

ACTS OF DISRUPTION

Within traditional epistemology, to know is a non-positional and transitive operation. 'It cannot be called a speech act' (p. 122). But in his analysis of a posthumous fragment by Nietzsche, de Man argues that since such a concept of knowing presupposes the prior existence and the identity of the entity to be known, 'the claim to know is just an unwarranted totalization of the claim to perceive and to feel' (p. 123). Indeed, for Nietzsche, the identity of entities is grounded in 'an analogical, metaphorical substitution of the sensation of things for the knowledge of entities' (p. 122). It follows from this that the entity of knowing, characterised by the identity of its being, is the result of 'the positional power of language in general', that it is 'linguistically *gesetzt*, a correlative of speech acts'. Knowing depends on the substitution of a semiotic, metonymic mode of reference for a substantialist, metaphorical one. It is a function of a substitutional linguistic act. And de Man concludes his analysis by saying that 'since the language of identity and of logic asserts itself in the imperative mode . . . it recognizes its own activity as the positing of entities. Logic consists of positional speech acts' (p. 123). Is this to say that de Man simply takes over and translates the theoretical parameters of speech act theory into his readings? Are his analyses mere applications of Austin's theory to philosophical and literary texts? But de Man asks: 'Is language an act, a "sollen" or a "tun," and now that we know that there is no longer such an illusion as that of knowledge but only feigned truths, can we replace knowledge by performance?' (p. 124). This question alone is already sufficient reason to resist any temptation to assimilate and consequently to blur the distinctions between de Man's readings and speech act theory.

The retranslation of knowing into a linguistic act represents an operation which in de Man's terminology is called deconstruction. But Nietzsche's text does not itself enact what it preaches, objects de Man. 'The text deconstructs the authority of the principle of contradiction by showing that this principle is an act, but when it acts out this act, it fails to perform the deed to which the text owed its status as an act' (p. 127). By failing to act out the fact that a text springs forth from an act, the text deconstructs what in the first deconstruction had been opposed to knowing, that is to say, acting. Thus 'the possibility of "doing" is as manifestly being

deconstructed as the identity principle' (p. 126), and 'the assertion that language is an act . . . cannot be taken as final' (p. 125).

Although Nietzsche, in particular in *The Genealogy of Morals*, seems to affirm the idea of action, one should not be blind to the fact that as a whole Nietzsche's work is an attack 'upon the more fundamental motion of "act"' (p. 128). De Man develops this point by showing that Nietzsche refuses to conceive of thinking as an act: 'the illusion of thought as action is the result of an . . . illegitimate totalization from part to whole'. But in that case, the affirmation by the first deconstruction that knowing is caused by an illegitimate substitution of a linguistic model again becomes questionable. De Man writes:

The text on the principle of identity established the universality of the linguistic model as speech act, albeit by voiding it of epistemological authority and by demonstrating its inability to perform this very act. But a . . . later text . . . voids even this dubious assurance, for it puts in question not only that language can act rightly, but that it can be said to act at all. The first passage . . . on identity showed that constative language is in fact performative, but the second passage . . . asserts that the possibility for language to perform is just as fictional as the possibility for language to assert. (p. 129)

Consequently 'what seems to lead to an established priority of "setzen" over "erkennen", of language as action over language as truth, never quite reaches its mark'. There cannot be a new totalisation on the basis of the concept of language as action, a concept which came to deconstruct the idea of language as truth. As a result, 'the differentiation between performative and constative language (which Nietzsche anticipates) is undecidable' (p. 130). Thus, Nietzsche's deconstruction of knowing by positing, a deconstruction which forestalls Austin's reinscription of the constative within the performative, leads, via the rigour of his deconstruction, to a critique of the very notion of act which is constitutive of the Austinian concept of speech act. What Nietzsche recognizes is that to use the notion of act as a conceptualising and totalising tool to understand language is as deceitful as the traditional view, according to which language is knowing. This refusal by de Man to endow the concept of act with the totalizing

explicative power it has in speech act theory is his first critique of this doctrine.

De Man's entire analysis of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*, as well as of the passages from the Second Discourse concerning language, is testimony to the fact that Austin's revolution can already be found in Rousseau. In the same way that 'the intersubjective, reflective situation of self-encounter, as in the specular self-fascination of Narcissus, is indeed for Rousseau the paradigmatic experience from which all other experiences are derived' (p. 152), so the cognitive, referential function of denomination is rooted in the self-referential function of the linguistic event. De Man seems here to accept uncritically the validity of the theoretical presuppositions of speech act theory.

But to paraphrase de Man, this is not yet the end of the parable, since the self-reflexivity of language as act that he has been speaking about corresponds to a sort of 'original blindness'. 'A blind metaphorization' (p. 156) constitutes all literal reference and all subsequent figural connotation. The literal reference is only a *substitute* for a first 'wild, spontaneous metaphor' (p. 153). With this it becomes, literally speaking, impossible to distinguish any longer between literal reference and the figural. And, instead of being the condition of possibility of literal reference, the original self-referentiality of language becomes precisely its impossibility since literal reference appears to be only just one more aberrant metaphor. Thus, although de Man conceives of conceptual language as preceding denominative language, of the self-referentiality preceding the referentiality of language, the blindness of that origin, instead of being the secure origin of referential awareness, is only the condition of possibility of the original aberration. In other words, the self-reflexivity of language, of the act of the speech act, is not as in speech act theory the condition of possibility of the representationalism of language, it is on the contrary only the impossible condition of possibility (or the condition of the impossibility) of referentialism, since it is true that 'the loss of faith in the reliability of referential meaning does not free language altogether from referential and tropological coercion' (p. 208). The self-referentiality of language as act is the condition of possibility for referential illusion of language, for an illusory effect which has all the aspects of reality. With this reinterpretation of the relation between the self-reflexive and the referential function of

language, in terms of an impossible condition of possibility, we face de Man's second critique of speech act theory.

But with what has been outlined here as the 'self-destructive epistemology of conceptual language' preceding referential, intentional language (p. 158), we have not yet reached de Man's major critique of speech act theory. This doctrine having been subjected to a critique concerning the explicative power of its notion of act, as well as to a critique of the relation between the act and what it is supposed to make possible, will next become exposed to a most thorough critique of the very notion of reflexivity. This happens in the chapters entitled 'Self (*Pygmalion*)' and 'Excuses (*Confessions*)', in which de Man proceeds to a deconstruction of the totalising figure of self-(reflexivity) and to a dismantling of totalising specular configurations.

Precisely because 'the pressure towards meaning and the pressure towards its undoing can never cancel each other out', language by always being only about concepts substituting originally blind metaphors, 'can never know whether it is about anything at all including itself, since it is precisely the *aboutness*, the referentiality, that is in question' (p. 161). Indeed, if for structural reasons it cannot be decided whether language is about anything including itself, the very distinction between referential and self-referential becomes suspect. This asymmetry is so fundamental, says de Man, that the very possibility of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality of language becomes questionable. De Man's argument in 'Self' is indeed that the loss of the epistemological stability of the figure of the self in *Pygmalion* is never recuperated in the text. On the contrary, 'a surplus (or deficiency)' (p. 184) in the text of *Pygmalion* prevents that play from coming under the authority of an epistemology of self. With this the totalising symmetry of reflexivity is once and for all thrown out of balance.

Before scrutinising this 'surplus (or deficiency)' which comes to disrupt the possible closure of the figure of self or of specularity, as in 'Excuses (*Confessions*)', let us remark that the threefold critique of speech act theory here outlined does not represent a simple rejection of it. Taking de Man's definition of allegory into account, once can say that speech act theory has only been allegorised as a figure. It has been undermined as a means of theoretical imperialism, as an all-explicatory device. But it is precisely as such an aborted machine of totalisation that the allegorical, narrational version of speech act theory can appear again as a model for the totalities in displacement that are texts.

Yet, before being able to evaluate fully the scope of such an allegorisation of the speech act, it is imperative to bring to the fore at least some of the philosophical implications of this critique. Philosophically speaking, what does it mean to subject the notion of act to a critique like de Man's? And what does the notion of act in speech act have to be retraced back to? If language is an act, a doing, a performance, then language is positional. Fichte's development of the notion of positing in *Science of Knowledge* is then naturally one of the basic sources that speech act theory must be retraced back to, although no explicit traces of such a filiation can be discovered in the corpus of that doctrine.

Positing (*Setzen*) as a concept means in Kant the affirmation of being in judgement. Yet, in trying to overcome the circularity of all theory of self-consciousness by continuing to develop what in Kant already pointed toward a dialectical philosophy, Fichte proceeds to endow the notion of positing with active meaning. Contrary to Kant, for whom being is posited in a passive way by all judgements, being is actively posited (or set forth) according to Fichte's interpretation of this concept. An active positing of being, however, implies that all objective positing presupposes a self-positing, not of a subject, since the subject is determined by the posited object which is opposed to it, but of a self (*Ich*). The self as the absolute presupposition of the subject-object relation is absolutely active and merely active. This pure activity of the self 'has no sort of object, but returns upon itself'.²⁴ The infinite activity of the self-positing self secures the self's being through its reflection of itself into itself. It can be envisaged as 'that of a self-constituting mathematical point, in which we can distinguish no direction or anything else whatever'.²⁵ The self must posit itself in such a manner, if it is to posit anything else. The self before it can as a subject posit an object, before it can limit itself in its infinity by the finitude of a non-self, must have posited itself in an absolutely unconditioned manner as itself. It is thus important to realise that self and subject or ego are not the same. The subject or ego is determined by an opposed object, and vice versa. The self, however, is not opposed to anything before it has constituted itself in the act of self-positing. The pure activity of it is the condition of possibility of the objective activity of a subject, of 'the self given in actual consciousness'.²⁶ Fichte writes:

Insofar as no object can be posited without an activity of the self, opposed to that of the object, and insofar as this activity must

necessarily exist in the subject prior to any object whatsoever, and simply through the subject itself (so that it is the pure activity thereof), the pure activity of the self is, as such, a condition of any activity that posits an object.²⁷

This genuinely speculative theory of the identity of self determines the non-empirical act (*Thathandlung*) which as the unity of consciousness lies at the basis of all consciousness and all self-consciousness, and makes it possible. Now, if this reversion into itself is the condition of possibility of all intentional and objective consciousness, and even of the consciousness of self, it becomes obvious that the status of the performative act, constitutive of the speech act, has its roots in Fichte's idea of a self-positing self. The notion of the identity of the self in Fichte indeed expresses the recognition, 'that everything that is to be my presentation (*Vorstellung*) has got to be related to myself' as intelligence.²⁸

The intellect as such observes itself; and this self-observation is directed immediately upon its every feature. The nature of intelligence consists in this immediate unity of being and seeing . . . I think of this or that object: what, then, does this involve, and how, then, do I appear to myself in this thinking? In no other way than this: when the object is a merely imaginary one, I create certain determinations in myself; when the object is to be something real, these determinations are present without my aid: and I observe that creation and this being. They are in me only insofar as I observe them: seeing and being are inseparably united.²⁹

The analogy between Fichte's principle of the unconditioned identity of the self and the act of speech act theory cannot be overlooked: in both cases it is by means of the purity of an 'act upon an act itself, which specific act is preceded by no other whatever',³⁰ that a subject becomes objective or that a speech act turns into an intentional act. Nor can it be overlooked that Austin's concept of the act as a pure doing is like the Fichtean *Thathandlung* linked to the notion of presence. The Fichtean 'act' is an inversion of the self upon itself, a reflection of the self upon itself (prior to all subject-object separation) by means of which it acquires (itself) its present being.³¹ Before this inversion of the self there is no self. As seen, Austin's notion of the performative is also linked to the idea

of a present act that is constitutive of its very presence. The reason for this similarity is that Fichte's and Austin's philosophy is tributary to the metaphysics of subjectivity (which, by the way, cannot be escaped in any way by opting for a philosophy of the social, the communal, the collective and so on). At least in so far as the Fichtean principle of self = self is understood as the principle of identity of consciousness and of subjectivity, Fichte's philosophy is a philosophy in which spirit is understood as subject.³² On the other hand, Austin's speech acts are undoubtedly acts of subjects before all social mediation. Positing, then, as the act through which the self asserts itself in its being before all intentionality, or as the act that precedes the speech act's becoming an act of denomination or of communication, is dependent on the conception of spirit as a subject, or of language as the predominant manifestation of the subject's subjectivity. Such a notion of positing is, however, the positing of metaphysics. Heidegger has argued in the following way:

According to the tenets of modern idealism, the labor of the spirit is a positing, a setting (thesis). Because the spirit is conceived as subject, and is accordingly represented within the subject-object model, the positing (thesis) must be the synthesis between the subject and its objects.³³

Positing in Fichte is the activity of the self, which is just another name for spirit: 'all positing in general, and absolute positing in particular, is attributable to the self'.³⁴ The self in Fichte by virtue of its self-positing nature corresponds to reason (*Vernunft*), which although it inscribes within itself the Kantian oppositions of understanding, particularly that of subject and object, is nevertheless to be understood basically in terms of subjectivity. Although the self-positing of the self is the condition of possibility of the subject and its positing of an object, it is a synthesis of subject and object under the aegis of subjectivity. Obviously enough, this does not mean that the self would be identical to human subjectivity since it is precisely the subjectivity of the spirit which comes to ground the human opposition of subject and object. However one interprets positing in Fichte, its *Setzen* is not simply human. Nor is it to be mistaken for human law, for *Gesetz*. It is important to be aware of this, particularly because both Fichte's philosophy of positing and Austin's speech act theory (which because of its notion of act is not

simply to be mistaken for the act of speaking human beings) have been 'humanised' in order to become applicable to a certain analysis of literature. Without mentioning here the conversion of Fichte's philosophy into the philosophy of early Romanticism, all we want to evoke for the moment is Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics. Schleiermacher's notion of free deed (*freie Tat*) – this 'immense, almost infinite expression of force',³⁵ which is the starting point of any 'discourse as a closed off whole', that is to say of all work of art, particularly of the literary work of art, is a psychological variation of Fichte's notion of 'act' (*Thathandlung*). For Schleiermacher it can only be understood with reference to the life of the individual, and by means of what he called the divinator. The applications of speech act theory to literary texts remain within the psychological horizon of this romantic hermeneutics. After everything has been taken into account, positing is thus reduced to the act of subjectivity of empirical selves, be they geniuses or not.

Far from continuing the metaphysics of transcendental subjectivity of Fichte's and Austin's theories of the 'act', and even less the humanised versions of this philosophy, de Man's critique of speech act theory reaches toward an interrogation of the fundamental assumptions of idealist philosophy, and of its application to the interpretation of literature. Far from accepting a concept of positing, or of the performative, which would possess the totalising explicatory power of a principle associated with values such as presence and subjectivity, de Man's critique aims at a determination of the performative and of positing which abandons the horizon of metaphysics. Although metaphysics still raises the notion of act to the status of a transcendental concept, by endowing this concept with the attributes of subjectivity, it demonstrates that it still thinks too little of it. Yet, before clarifying the direction in which de Man develops his concept of the performative, it will be useful to meditate on how Heidegger determines the original meaning of positing.

As Hegel has shown in the *Differenzschrift*, positing sublates the positing specific of understanding (*Verstand*) which still proceeds by oppositions.³⁶ Yet, since this sublation is conceived in terms of subjectivity – that is, of creation, production, generation and so on – it is an essentially metaphysical concept of positing. But positing, originally, draws its sense from the Greek notion of *thesis*, which means a doing which is not only not predominantly human, but

which above all does not signify an activity in the sense of action and agency. The Greek sense of *thesis* is, as Heidegger has argued in 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 'to let lie forth in its radiance and presence'. It has 'the sense of bringing here into the unconcealed, bringing forth into what is present [*Anwesendes*] that is, letting or causing to lie forth'.³⁷ In other words, *thesis* is a mode of *aletheia*, of truth as unconcealing. While discussing Hegel's interpretation of *thesis* as the positing of being without mediation, Heidegger, in his essay 'Hegel und die Griechen', shows how Hegel's dialectical critique of the apparent abstraction of this Greek concept of positing and being is the result of his indebtedness to a philosophy of subjectivity. 'Hegel when conceiving of being as undetermined immediacy, experiences being as posited by the determining and conceiving subject'.³⁸ This then allows Heidegger to raise the following question:

When Hegel characterizes being as the first coming forth and the first manifestation of the spirit, it remains to be questioned whether unconcealing must not already be implicated in this coming forth and in this self-manifestation. . . . If Hegel lets the original position of his system culminate in the absolute idea, in the complete self-appearance of the spirit, then one is forced to ask whether unconcealing is not at stake even in this appearing, i.e. in the phenomenology of the spirit, and, consequently in absolute self-knowledge. And immediately one more question must be raised, whether unconcealing has its place in the spirit as absolute subject, or whether unconcealing is itself the place, and points toward the place, in which something like a representing subject can first come to 'be' what it is.³⁹

In other words, Heidegger suggests that the metaphysical concept of positing (and even more so the empirical, humanised version of it) is in the last resort dependent on the original meaning of positing, that is to say, on the Greek sense of *thesis* as a setting up in the unconcealed. What is true of Hegel is no less true of Fichte. For Fichte the positing of being is identical to that of self. But the original meaning of positing is, as Heidegger specifies, donation. All concepts of positing, according to which the act of positing is a present act constitutive of presence, hinge on positing as the letting come forth into what is present. In order that an act may be the present act of a self engendering itself as spirit, a self

presupposed by all real subjects, an original *thesis* must already have taken place: a *thesis* through which the clearing is freed in which a self can come to posit itself.

Like *physis* which as the holding-sway (*Walten*) of nature is *thesis par excellence*, so *poesis* is *thesis*, a mode of *aletheia* as unconcealing.

But to say that *poesis* is *thesis*, a mode of unconcealing, is also to say that *poesis* is a mode of concealing, according to Heidegger's translation and interpretation of *aletheia*. *Thesis* as a bringing into the open of the unconcealed is the concealing of what comes forth, precisely because what comes forth in this manner appears as something present. *Thesis* as a mode of *aletheia* is thus a simultaneous bringing forth into what is present, and a withholding of what is allowed to appear. Or, to put it differently, positing (*Setzen*) is a translation (*Übersetzung*) of the concealed into what is present, the distorting gesture of the revelation of which is at once reversed again by a foreclosing retranslation (*Übersetzung*) into what is concealed. It is this double movement of positing as *thesis* which we now have to keep in mind as we are circling back to de Man in order to determine in a more precise way the status of the notion of the performative in his analyses of literary works.

That concept of positing, which according to Heidegger is more original than the metaphysical concept of positing, is a concept which stresses the movement of the return into concealment of what is revealed in, or as, what is. It is a concept which accounts for both the disclosure and its interruption, since what reveals itself in the mode of *aletheia* appears only as concealed. It is a concept which makes unconcealing hinge on the interruption of presence, that is of the mode in which that which reveals itself also conceals itself. A similar movement also characterises de Man's notion of the performative.

The question we had left pending concerned the nature of the 'surplus (or deficiency)', which was said to disrupt totalising figures, such as the self or specularity. At present it remains to show that such a disruption also impedes a text (in general) from closing upon itself. Like the legal text, all texts are distinguished by 'an unavoidable estrangement' (p. 266) between the generality of their functioning and the particularity of their meaning, says de Man. This estrangement is one between the system of relationships that generates a text, and that functions independently of its referential meaning (that is, its grammar), and its referentiality; between the text as 'a logical code or machine', and considerations

of its applicability or interpretability. This relation of estrangement between the text as a machine and the particularity of its meaning is one of constitution and deconstitution. 'The logic of grammar generates texts only in the absence of referential meaning, but every text generates a referent that subverts the grammatical principle to which it owed its constitution' (p. 269). However, such a determination of the text, as an agonistic field opposing the machine of its grammar to the particular meanings that come to restrict the text's generality, bears witness to an allegorised notion of text.

The divergence between grammar and referential meaning is what we call the figural dimension of language. . . . We call text any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective; as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and as a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence. The 'definition' of text also states the impossibility of its existence and prefigures the allegorical narratives of this impossibility. (p. 270)

This allegorised concept of text, which clearly distinguishes de Man's use of the notion of text from its colloquial use (as well as the possible range of its applications), leads to the notion that a text is the narrative (the temporal and metonymic display) of its impossible closure, that is to say, of the impossibility of what one calls (metaphorically) a self-reflexive text. To determine a text as the narration of its impossibility to become a whole, however, does not mean that the text would be about this impossibility, for narrative is here to be understood primarily in a structural fashion. An allegorised concept of text is not the present performance of the text presenting itself as the display of the impossibility of its possible closure.

For de Man, then, a text is the impossible unity of the performative and the constative functions of language, since the performative is associated with the generating grammar, with the text as machine, whereas the constative is linked to the referential level of the text. After what we have seen concerning de Man's deconstruction of the totalising explicative power of both the cognitive and performative function, this should no longer surprise us. But, we also already know that these reciprocal deconstructions are not

symmetrical. Hence the narrative layout of the text. The thrust of the performative, however deconstructed, remains unimpaired. Yet, what kind of performative is it that structures in this manner the allegorised concept of text? The irreducible performative constitutive of the text is manifest in the 'quantitative economy of loss', in the textual thermodynamics governed by a 'debilitating entropy' of the linguistic structure of the text, 'in which grammar and figure, statement and speech act do not converge' (p. 272). Or, which is the same thing, in the production of textual excess. It is visible as surplus or as deficiency. It becomes manifest in the displacement of the paired but incompatible functions of the text, such as the cognitive and the performative. The performative constitutive of texts enacts both the performative and cognitive functions of language in their reciprocal incompatibility. De Man argues:

Language itself dissociates the cognition from the act. *Die Sprache verspricht (sic)*; to the extent that is necessarily misleading, language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth. (p. 277)

The performative constitutive of texts as displaced totalities of paired but incompatible functions, far from permitting texts to close upon themselves (from becoming selves, reflexive and autonomous entities) temporalises, historises them. The performative, then, is characterised by its power of dissociation. In particular, by the dissociation of the cognitive from the act within what Austin called the total speech act. This allegorised notion of the performative, as a disjunctive which generates time and history, is the major topic of the last chapter of *Allegories*. In 'Excuses (*Confessions*)' de Man demonstrates how in Rousseau's *Confessions* 'performative rhetoric and cognitive rhetoric, the rhetoric of tropes, fail to converge' (p. 300). Yet, these disruptions are no longer part of the representational logic of rhetoric. For in being located at the disrupting intersection of the two rhetorical codes, they are anterior to these codes, and generate the sets of their particular figures. For the same reason they cannot become the object of an understanding which would make the mastering of the tropological displacement the very burden of understanding, because these non-figures are the very condition of possibility of intelligibility. They remain 'exterior' to understanding. These disruptive figures

at the intersection of the two rhetorical functions of the text, which generate the narrative displacement of the text by preventing the two functions from merging in a totality, are no isolated events in a text. On the contrary, they are extended, says de Man 'over all the points of the figural line or allegory; in a slight extension of F. Schlegel's formulation . . . the text becomes the permanent parabasis of an allegory of figure, that is to say irony' (pp. 300). In other words, the text, in the last resort, is constituted (but is this still a constitution?), by a notion of performative, of positing which makes it unconceal itself only as the displaced totality of paired, but incompatible, textual functions. But to speak of unconcealing here, and thus of concealing, is slightly misleading, since it may suggest wrongly that the bringing to the fore of the text could still be the task of any hermeneutics whatsoever.

To conclude then, let us try to assess in as succinct a manner as possible the scope of de Man's critical enterprise. Considering the threefold critique of speech act theory, de Man's readings certainly cannot be said to be an application of this theory. This does not, however, mean that this critique is merely negative. On the contrary, it represents an attempt at developing a more fundamental notion of the performative than the notion of self-positing on which Austin's speech act theory rests, and which keeps it locked within the boundaries of philosophical idealism and the metaphysics of subjectivity. Similar to that notion of positing which according to Heidegger is more original than Fichte's or Hegel's dialectical concept of it, de Man's notion of it is more 'original' than the concept of positing characteristic of a certain Romanticism, of Schleiermacher, for example, for whom 'everything which is represented as a leap (*Sprung*) and as a turning point' unavoidably 'leads back again to what is bound'.⁴⁰ De Man's notion of positing is critical of all Romantic aspiration toward totality, albeit negatively that of the fragment.

If de Man's developments upon the notion of positing and totality show him to be critical of a certain Romanticism, this does not mean, however, that he would reject Romanticism in general. Already to believe in an eventual and definitive separation from Romanticism is indeed illusory and naïve, since it would imply that one already knew what Romanticism is. Contrary to those seemingly radical bounds beyond Romanticism, bounds which invariably only lead one back deeper into what one was trying to escape, slight deviations carry the promise of some fundamental

displacements. Such a deviation is 'the slight extension', that is to say, the generalisation of Schlegel's notion of parabasis, a generalisation which displaces the proper meaning of this rhetorical figure to make it the non-figure of the performative of the text. This being said, one may make a further step in trying to evaluate the shift in *Allegories* from speech act theory as a set of rules about ordinary language to its founding concept of act. The critique to which de Man subjects this notion throughout his writing is a critique oriented towards and exploration of a more radical notion of positing. Positing understood as a *disruptive thesis* becomes in this manner the founding principle of a new *poesis*. Instead of being merely studies in poetry or in literary texts, de Man's allegories of reading are attempts at developing a poetics, a poetics no longer grounded, however, in the mimesis of nature and of ideas or, as in romantic aesthetics – reinterpreting Fichte's philosophical problems of self-foundation and self-reflection in terms of a philosophy of language – in the *form* of the activity of the human mind. On the contrary, the poetics envisioned by de Man is the poetics of 'act' as disruptive and productive of both form and content. It is a poetics of a process of *poesis* which as *Setzung* translates (*übersetzen*) itself as the disruption of the presence of its own necessarily doubled appearance.

Notes

1. *New Literary History*, vol. VI, no. 2 (1975) p. 332.
2. *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) p. 22.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
4. Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc.', *Glyph*, vol. 2 (1977) pp. 83ff.
5. *Things with Words*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
17. What is here being hailed as revolutionary, the rediscovery of the act-character of language, is a view which the eighteenth century was

very familiar with. One may think of Condillac's *langage d'action* or of Rousseau's *langage des passions*. Besides Nietzsche's insight into the active nature of language (to which Austin seems to be secretly indebted), one cannot avoid mentioning Heidegger's analysis of *Zuhandenheit* in *Being and Time* (1927) of which Austin apparently was not aware. When Searle in *Speech Acts, An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1976) speaks somewhere of 'the classical period of analytical philosophy' (my italics), or when he writes that 'reference has a long history of treatment by philosophers, going back at least as far as Frege (and really as far back as Plato's *Theaetetus*, if not earlier)' (p. 77), one cannot but wonder, precisely because of the parenthesis, in what ways this obvious absence of a sense of philosophical tradition affects the very project of speech acts.

18. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1966) pp. 273–4.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 274
20. *La transparence et l'énociation, pour introduire à la pragmatique* (Paris, 1976) p. 21.
21. *Things with Words*, p. 149.
22. *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn., 1980). All page references within the text refer to this work.
23. In 'Deconstruction as Criticism', *Glyph*, vol. 6 (1978), I have tried to unravel some of the confusion that exists between Derrida's work and the use which has been made of it by most of the so-called deconstructors. Derrida is not a Derridean. The present study is an attempt at further differentiating the theoretical positions linked to the debate on deconstruction.
24. J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, with the *First and Second Introduction*, ed. and trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (New York, 1970) p. 226.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 231–2.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
31. For this relation between positing and reflection, cf. W. Benjamin, 'Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik', *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt, 1974) pp. 22–5.
32. For a non-conventional interpretation of Fichte's principle, as well as for the transformation of his philosophy into the philosophy of the early Romantics, see the remarkable article by W. Hamacher, 'Der Satz der Gattung: Friedrich Schlegels poetologische Umsetzung von Fichtes unbedingtem Grundsatz', *MLN*, vol. 95 (1980) pp. 1155–80.
33. M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz (New York, 1971) p. 118.
34. *Science of Knowledge*, p. 153.
35. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank (Frankfurt, 1977) p. 327.
36. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y., 1977).

37. M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York, 1971) pp. 82–3.
38. M. Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt, 1967) p. 269.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 267–8.
40. *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, p. 139.

12

The Lateral Dance: The Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller

VINCENT B. LEITCH

A critic must choose either the tradition of presence or the tradition of 'difference,' for their assumptions about language, about literature, about history, and about the mind cannot be made compatible.

(J. Hillis Miller, in *Criticism of Identification*)

These words of J. Hillis Miller make us slightly uncomfortable because they demand that we choose one tradition or another. Without question, the decision involves the 'whole shebang'. This succinctly formulated 'either/or' choice not only asks us to take a stand but foregrounds for us a fundamental rift in contemporary critical theory.

Significantly, Miller posed this choice in his lengthy essay on 'Georges Poulet's "Criticism of Identification"' in 1971.¹ Between 1958 and 1969 he worked, of course, as a devoted son of Poulet, the patriarch of the Geneva school of phenomenological critics. As a member of this continental front for the 'tradition of presence', Miller produced several admirable books, including *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958), *The Disappearance of God* (1963), *Poets of Reality*, (1965), *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968) and *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970). But sometime in the late 1960s his allegiance started to shift, and by 1970 he emerged as a

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member of the Paris school of deconstructive critics – a group that, following the lead of Jacques Derrida, proclaimed the ‘tradition of “différance”’.

The rift between Poulet and Miller dramatises the either/or choice presented in the 1971 essay. Towards the end of his meticulously fair description of Poulet’s criticism and his scrupulously impersonal exposition of the deconstruction of this phenomenology, Miller poses the clear choice. It is a primal scene: the son turns irrevocably from the father. Yet these same pages show Miller trying to align Poulet with Derrida – an attempt that succeeds only in part. Parallel to the break with Poulet is the split, in the next year, with modern humanistic scholarship, which occurs dramatically when Miller publishes a devastating review of M. H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971). Precisely because ‘*Natural Supernaturalism* is in the grand tradition of modern humanistic scholarship, the tradition of Curtius, Auerbach, Lovejoy, [and] C. S. Lewis’, Miller criticises the book or, more accurately, the tradition for having inadequate concepts of language, literature, history and interpretation.² Here the rift in contemporary critical theory, opened by deconstructive criticism, emerges in public for the first time in America.

DIFFERENCE

By 1970 Miller had chosen the ‘tradition of “difference”’ over the ‘tradition of presence’, as is evident from his essay ‘Williams’ *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry’ (1970), where he sketches out a rough theory of difference with the aid of Derrida’s earlier seminal study ‘La Différance’ (1968).³ In fact, most of Miller’s essays since 1970 are explicitly grounded in the operations of différance. Here is Miller’s most succinct explanation of the term:

Each leaf, wave, stone, flower, or bird is different from all others. Their similarity to one another arises against the ground of this basic dissimilarity. In a similar way, language is related to what it names across the gap of its incorrigible difference from its referent. Within language itself, the relation of sign to sign, of a literary work to the precursor work that it brings to a strange

new flowering after date, is, once again, a similarity based on discontinuity and difference.⁴

All similarities are produced out of differences. Thus difference is constitutive of resemblances, repetitions and similarities. To say, for instance, that two birds resemble each other is to affirm subtly their initial difference. What is here true for birds is true for words also. A tree is not a t-r-e-e; that is, the wood and leaves are not the four black ink marks on white paper. The word and referent are different. The relation of a sign to another sign or a text to a source-text is likewise constituted as difference.

The relations between entities, therefore, are not based on unity and continuity but rather are composed as differential and decentred formations. Applying this finding to words in general, Miller points out that 'all words are metaphors – that is, all are differentiated, differed, deferred. Each leads to something of which it is the displacement in a movement without origin or end.'⁵ The force of difference undermines the traditional concepts of origin and unity; the idea of a discontinuous and differential unity or origin is unthinkable. To perform an easy test case, one need only trace the etymology of a key word back to its roots to discover a labyrinth of semantic bifurcations and displacements ending in an impasse – the absence of authentic undifferentiated origin. In the beginning was the system of discontinuous words making up language, and these words were with man.⁶

THE TRADITION AND THE TEXT

Miller boldly recasts the concepts of 'tradition' and 'text':

Plato was not the inaugurator of an Occidental civilization merely, as Whitehead said, a 'footnote' to his work. He was himself already a latecomer, an afterthought. He was as belated footnote to still earlier footnotes, themselves footnotes, themselves footnotes to footnotes, with *nowhere* an original text as such.⁷

the tradition is not determined by coercive 'sources' which have imposed themselves century after century, but is a matter of concepts, metaphors, and myths, each generating the others,

which are latently *there in the lexicon, the grammar, and the syntax of our languages*.⁸

A literary text is not a thing in itself, 'organically unified,' but a relation to other texts which are relations in their turn. The study of literature is therefore a study of intertextuality.⁹

Every text is constituted by *intertextuality* because the word stock, the grammar and the syntax of language embody innumerable sources and influences. A unified work is inconceivable in that a text is unavoidably the production of a language, which is always conditioned by a chain of forerunners. Even if a text were somehow magically produced in a vacuum, the language of this hypothetical text would violate the uncontaminated site since it would necessarily bear within it the marks of countless ancestors.

To track down every single source and influence in a work to its precise point of origin is manifestly impossible. (Only the force of desire or the existence of hypotheses without truth-value allows us to think otherwise.) The actual place of inauguration of any word, concept, idea or myth is indeterminate. Thus, the critical concepts of 'origin' and 'unity' are undermined by the inescapable operations of intertextuality as well as by the ubiquitous forces of *différance*.

LANGUAGE AND THE SELF

As soon as a thing or a thought or a feeling is mentioned, it enters a system of words where it joins the forces already at play in language. Our ideas and values are produced in this way. We exist in a house of language – a prison-house of language. While our words refer to things, concepts and emotions, they are not themselves these entities. The lesson of difference makes this clear. Language in the (prison) house is differential as well as referential. The disturbing discontinuous aspect of language comes about because words are really figures – substitutions or displacements – which stand for something. Necessarily, language is not simply referential but rhetorical. In so far as language is rhetorical, our world is text. Such rhetoricity and textuality are irreducible. Miller establishes and expands upon these observations forcefully in his review of Abrams's book:

Rather than figures of speech being derived or 'translated' from proper uses of language, all language is figurative at the beginning. The notion of a literal or referential use of language is only an illusion born of the forgetting of the metaphorical 'roots' of language. Language is from the start fictive, illusory, displaced from any direct reference to things as they are. The human condition is to be caught in a web of words which weaves and reweaves for man through the centuries the same tapestry of myths, concepts, and metaphorical analogies, in short, the whole system of Occidental metaphysics.¹⁰

This dramatic final sentence effects a deliberate reversal. The condition of man is to be caught in language; to put it another way, language constitutes for us the world – reality. Rather than saying we employ language as an instrument, Miller suggests that language uses us: 'language is not an instrument or tool in man's hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his "world"; including poems'.¹¹ The main question that comes to mind here is whether man can choose to have language determine him. Does language necessarily have its way with man? Seemingly, language determines consciousness and human intentions rather than the reverse, which is the traditional explanation of the relation of language and the self.

The status of the self in Miller's theory of language is clear. He sees human consciousness as 'a fathomless chasm' and the (apparent) stability of the self as 'an effect of language': 'The self is a linguistic construction rather than being the given, the rock, a solid *point de départ*.'¹² In short, 'there is no literal language of consciousness, the self being itself a figure or an effect of language'.¹³ Human consciousness and intentionality are not the sources of language; they are effects of language. To make these effects into causes is to put late before early – to construct a trope. The *self* is a figurative construction, a *metalepsis*.¹⁴ Just as literary texts create selves (characters) through language, so philosophical and psychological texts establish the seemingly irreducible *self in language*. The *self* of any author as well as of any literary character is, in reality, mere figurative construction: 'There is not any "Shakespeare himself." "Shakespeare" is an effect of the text. . . . The same can be said of the texts published under the name of any other author.'¹⁵

As Miller deconstructs the traditional belief that language is an instrument used by human consciousness to transmit meanings,

he undermines the grounds of Occidental metaphysics. In his deconstruction of this so-called logocentric tradition, Miller, following Derrida, sees the ancestral metaphysical system as – nevertheless – inescapable, though not impervious. Since ‘our languages contain no terms, no concepts, and no metaphors which are not inextricably implicated in the patterns of metaphysical thinking’, there is no way out – no escape from the system.¹⁶ ‘As Jacques Derrida has argued’, notes Miller, ‘alternative schemes have a way of turning out to be another version of metaphysics.’¹⁷ Not unexpectedly, this protean power of traditional metaphysical language ultimately affects the overall conception of the self. ‘Though the self is illusion, . . . it is an illusion which constantly reforms itself, however often it is expelled.’¹⁸ On the one hand, then, we have the deconstruction of the traditional idea of the self (this de-formation is achieved through carefully tracking the figural play of language in the very formation of the concept): on the other hand, however, we discover that this deconstruction can never obliterate the constantly reforming idea of the self. All this resembles a recurring ‘pumpkin and magic coach’ structure, where Miller and Derrida play a doubled fairy godmother.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF METAPHYSICS

The Western tradition resembles the pumpkin in the famous fairy-tale because it embodies the strange potential to be readily transformed into a phantasmal vehicle, the only requirement being the right touch of magic. In this playful version of the fable, the magician–godmother is Miller–Derrida, and the pumpkin–coach is language. The concepts, figures and stories of our culture, incorporated as materials in our language, ‘contain both logocentric metaphysics and its subversion. This subversion is wrought into the conceptual words, the figures, and the myths of the Occident as the shadow in its light.’¹⁹ Miller–Derrida argues that the phantasmal productions of deconstruction, for example, difference, intertextuality and textuality, are derived from language – not imposed from the outside. Language, containing the metaphysical system (light) and its subversion (shadow), yields both conventional pumpkin and fantastic coach, as the magic of deconstruction labours always to show.

We need the magician to draw out the phantasmal productions.

When Miller, in the role of visionary magician, writes dramatically of 'the immense anacoluthon of Western literature, philosophy, and history as a "whole"', he unveils and presents the mysterious phantasm of language itself – 'a clash of incompatibles which grates, twists, or bifurcates the mind'.²⁰ Language is a heterogeneous fractured system bearing its own deconstruction, and this is the recurring lesson of the magician.

RHETORIC AS MAGIC

Anacoluthon, metalepsis, metaphor? Because language is always figurative, the idea of purely referential language is an illusion – a product of forgetting the figural ground of language. In order to uncover the endless founding chain of figures, Miller employs rhetoric – that is, magic – in his deconstructive critical projects. To chart the specific aberrant play of figures in a literary piece is to deconstruct its apparent referentiality and thereby to demonstrate the irreducible textuality of the work. Magic!

(Rhetorical analysis constitutes a narrow and powerful application of difference in so far as it relentlessly reveals the originating differential and discontinuous nature of literary language. Other applications of difference are possible, as Derrida demonstrates in his many philosophical analyses of conceptual hierarchies. Derrida's exemplary deconstruction of the 'supplement' in Rousseau's works is a case in point. Essentially Derrida shows in *Of Grammatology* how certain traditional binary oppositions, especially 'nature/culture', are illusory. According to traditional metaphysics, culture is initially beneficial – it comes as an addition to nature at a historical moment of peril. As culture lingers on, it comes to substitute for nature, thereby creating a detriment. In other words, culture supplements nature in two ways – as addition and as substitution. Traditionally, one term in such a polarity is privileged: for example, nature over culture, good over evil, health over disease. Derrida argues that there is no 'unsupplemented nature'. Such a notion has no truth-value; it is only the expression of a desire – a hypothesis, an illusion. The supplement, then, is a particular form of difference in which 'nature' is shown to be always already supplemented; that is, 'nature' from the start is structured as differential. Other non-synonymic forms of difference produced in Derrida's works now total around two dozen; the point here is that Derrida's conceptual analysis is an alternative to

rhetorical analysis in the general work of deconstruction. Other forms of deconstructive analysis remain to be developed.)

'Pater's work can be defined', concludes Miller in his exemplary essay on Walter Pater's *oeuvre*, 'as an exploration and deconstruction of the problematic trope of personification.'²¹ Significantly, Miller generalises this practical type of rhetorical analysis in a programmatic statement about the best future for literary criticism:

The study of literature should certainly cease to take the mimetic referentiality of literature for granted. Such a properly literary discipline would cease to be exclusively a repertoire of ideas, of themes, and of the varieties of human psychology. It would become once more philology, rhetoric, an investigation of the epistemology of tropes. . . . It would only put the philologist, lover of words, more painfully within the baffling shifts between referentiality and the refusals of referentiality that make up the intimate life of any literary text.²²

Next to historical, thematic and psychological criticism, Miller would have rhetorical criticism. Such a move to deconstructive rhetoric is conceived not as a happy escape from the simplicities of traditional criticism but as a painful confrontation with the baffling epistemology of literary texts. Basically, rhetoric provides a way to move beyond the closure of referentiality – a way to break through the tradition of presence.²³

The project of deconstructive rhetoric, however, proceeds on hollow grounds. There are no literal designations; language is originarily figural. With this collapse of the 'literal/figural' polarity, the work of rhetorical analysis is put in jeopardy. Rather than a referential/rhetorical structure, language is constituted as an infinite chain of figurative words which have no extralinguistic origin or end. Deconstructive rhetoric, then, is not a science of truth: 'the study of rhetoric leads to the abyss by destroying, through its own theoretical procedures, its own basic axiom'.²⁴ Miller accepts this impasse and celebrates the abyss. The end of magic.

(MIS)READING THE TEXT

'The concepts of origin, end, and continuity', proclaims Miller, 'are replaced by the categories of repetition, of difference, of discon-

tinuity, of openness, and of the free and contradictory struggle of individual human energies, each seen as a center of interpretation, which means misinterpretation, of the whole.²⁵ All interpretation is misinterpretation. To read is to connect elements and construct patterns out of the diffuse materials in a writing. As a reader works through the chain of words in a text, he or she imposes meaning in an act of willed mastery. Texts are *unreadable* – or *undecidable* – in that they allow a host of potential (mis)readings. To reduce a text to a 'correct' or single homogeneous reading is to restrain the *free play* of its elements. 'This does not mean', states Miller, 'that the narrator or the reader is free to give the narrative any meaning he wishes, but that the pattern is subject to "free play"', is formally "undecidable". Meaning emerges from a reciprocal act in which interpreter and what is interpreted both contribute to the making or the finding of a pattern.²⁶ Consequently, 'there are obviously strong and weak critical misreadings, more or less vital ones'.²⁷ But they are always *misreadings* because an interpretation can neither reach the 'original' meaning of a text nor contain all the potential readings. There can never be an 'objective' interpretation – only more or less vital misreadings.

THE LATERAL DANCE

One of Miller's strategies in reading a text is to trace the meaning of a key word back to its etymological roots. In so doing, he shifts the apparent stability of the master term out of a closed system and into a vertiginous labyrinth. The effect of such semantic dissemination is to deracinate the text, revealing the infinite possibilities for interpretation and the futility of logical and dialectical orderings. After reading Wallace Stevens's 'The Rock', Miller concludes: 'Such a poem is incapable of being encompassed in a single logical formulation. It calls forth potentially endless commentaries, each one of which, like this essay, can only formulate and reformulate its *mise en abîme*.'²⁸

How does a literary critic read a text? 'The reader is forced then to shift sideways again seeking to find somewhere else in the poem the solid ground of that figure, seeking, and failing or falling, and seeking again.'²⁹ The creation of a critical reading is the production of a failure. Trying to ground the interpretation in some element of the text, the critic always discovers that the ground collapses into

the freeplay of figure. He or she is compelled, then, to move down the chain of words, seeking a still point, which – in time – gives way again to the play of figure. Thus, the reader moves on, once again, to find another more stable foundation: 'The reader must then seek the literal base elsewhere, in a constant lateral transfer with no resting place in the unequivocally literal, the mimetic, the "exact rock", cured at last.'³⁰ Miller characterises the products of such reading acts as *mises en abîme* and he depicts the process of reading itself as a 'lateral dance'.

As he reads *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Miller gives full voice to his general theory of the lateral dance (here I conflate three important paragraphs):

Each passage is a node, a point of intersection or focus, on which converge lines leading from many other passages in the novel and ultimately including them all. No passage has any particular priority over the others, in the sense of being more important or as being the 'origin' or 'end' of the others. . . . Moreover, the chains of connection or of repetition that converge on a given passage are extremely complex and diverse in nature, and no one of these chains has archeological or interpretative priority over the others.

. . . The reader can only thread his way from one element to another, interpreting each as best he can in terms of the others. It is possible to distinguish chains of connection that are material elements in the text. . . . None of these chains, however, has priority over the others as the true explanation of the meaning of the novel. Each is a permutation of the others rather than a distinct realm of discourse. . . .

. . . The reader must execute a *lateral dance of interpretation* to explicate any given passage, without ever reaching, in this sideways movement, any passage that is chief, original, or originating, a sovereign principle of explanation.³¹

These metaphors of the dance reveal for us the moves in the act of interpretation. In so far as a text is a spatialised tapestry of interlocking threads (for example, words, images, characters, themes), it is constituted as level, meaning that no spot or passage can rise above any other. Nothing may be privileged: there can be no origin, no end, no focus, no priority element, no sovereign principle. To the extent that a text is a temporal chain of inter-

woven elements, the reader can only transfer elements from one sequence to another, stopping now and then – at will – to confer meaning through an arbitrary act of interpretation. There can be no ‘true’ explanation of meaning of the text – only more or less vital patterns of textual connections. Thus, the dance of deconstruction is structured, like all dance, as repetition, yet such repetition is ultimately liberated and hollowed out by difference. The parallel here with contemporary dancing is remarkably strong: after the waltz we have the swinger’s solo; and at the disco the music never stops, the dancers merely walk off when they have had enough.

THE TRADITION OF DIFFERENCE

Miller undermines traditional ideas and beliefs about language, literature, truth, meaning, consciousness and interpretation. In effect, he assumes the role of unrelenting destroyer – or nihilistic magician – who dances demonically upon the broken and scattered fragments of the Western tradition. Everything touched soon appears torn. Nothing is ever finally darned over, or choreographed for coherence, or foregrounded as (only) magical illusion. Miller, the relentless rift-maker, refuses any apparent repair and rampages onward, dancing, spellcasting, destroying all. As though he were a wizard, he appears in the guise of a bull-deconstructor loose in the china shop of Western tradition.

Significantly, Miller portrays himself and the great tradition otherwise. ‘The so-called “deconstruction of metaphysics” has always been a part of metaphysics, a shadow within its light, for example in the self-subversion of Plato in *The Sophist*.’³² All texts contain both the traditional materials of metaphysics and the subversion of these materials. ‘This subversion is wrought into the conceptual words, the figures, and the myths of the Occident as the shadow in its light.’ ‘Deconstruction’, then, ‘is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.’³³ Miller pictures himself as always moving into this land of shadows, seeking to go beyond the blinding light to the dark underside of history in order to make the ever-present darkness visible in the texts of the tradition.³⁴ As such, the deconstructive critic plays the old role of handmaiden to the text, though the maiden is now an underworld fairy godmother wielding boundless negativising powers.

While the subversion of logocentric metaphysics has always been a part of the tradition, 'the putting in question of metaphysics has taken a novel turn in modern times with new concepts of language, new ideas of structure, and new notions of interpretation'.³⁵ The shadow men of our tradition are known, if not loved:

One knows the familiar litany of the names of these doubters, underminers of the Occidental tradition in its economic and political theory, in its ethical and ontological notions, in its concepts of human psychology, and in its theory of language: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Saussure.³⁶

We can add to this tradition Derrida and Miller as well as many other practitioners of deconstruction in our time and in earlier epochs. In Miller's view these subversives are not revolutionaries.

Rather than the notion of revolution one needs the more enigmatic concept of repetition (repetition as displacement or decentering) to describe the effect of these writers on the culture to which, *like all of us*, they belong. By resurrection, rearrangement, re-emphasis, or reversal of old materials they have made a difference.³⁷

This tradition of difference within our culture is – as Miller describes it – actually a conservative force which ultimately renews and preserves culture by retrieving repressed materials. The conservative thrust of deconstructive criticism is very rarely recognised and almost never proclaimed publicly. Thus does the bull metamorphose into the lamb.

THE PROJECT OF DECONSTRUCTION

What are the means and ends of deconstruction? Miller offers the most lucid account yet written:

(1) Deconstruction as a mode of interpretation works by a careful and circumspect entering of each textual labyrinth. The critic feels his way from figure to figure, from concept to concept, from mythical motif to mythical motif, in a repetition which is in no

sense a parody. It employs, nevertheless, the subversive power present in even the most exact and unironical doubling. (2) The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing, the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. (3) The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.³⁸

This succinct depiction of deconstructive procedures clearly explains the means, the ends and the effects of deconstructive criticism. Whether employing a rhetorical or conceptual method of analysis, the deconstructive interpreter carefully traces and repeats certain elements in the text, which may include the figures, the concepts or the motifs in a work. As he or she repeats the selected elements, the critic unleashes the disruptive powers inherent in all repetition. In other words, the critic, through seemingly innocent repetition, foregrounds and sets in motion the operation of difference, bringing into play a disorienting chain of substitutions and displacements that ultimately destabilise and decentre the text. Since he or she cannot repeat all textual elements, the deconstructive critic must find and employ that element or those few which will undermine most effectively the whole text.³⁹ In this work of deconstruction, the critic comes upon his or her materials only in the text: consequently the deconstruction of the text is discovered to be already underway before the intervention of the critic. 'The critic cannot by any means get outside the text, escape from the blind alleys of language he finds in the work.'⁴⁰

Still, the project has not yet been fully disclosed. The deconstructor does not simply enter a work with an attentive eye for the loose thread or the alogical element that will decentre the entire text; he or she intends *beforehand* to reverse the traditional hierarchies that constitute the ground of the text. "'Deconstruction" as a procedure of interpreting the texts of our tradition', reveals Miller, 'is not simply a teasing out of the traces of that dialogical heterogeneity. . . . Deconstruction rather attempts to reverse the implicit hierarchy within the terms in which the dialogical has been defined. It attempts to define the monological, the logocentric, as a derived

effect of the dialogical rather than as the noble affirmation of which the dialogical is a disturbance, a secondary shadow in the originating light.⁴¹ The role of the deconstructor as shadow man re-emerges in the end; the project of deconstruction is ultimately to redefine 'tradition' itself by putting the 'tradition of "difference"' in place of the now-dominant 'tradition of presence'. On a more mundane level, the deconstructive critic works to widen the rift between the two traditions as a way to demonstrate the repression of the outlawed tradition while challenging the noble caretaking of the canonised tradition. In other words, the practice of rhetorical analysis has for its goal the deconstruction not only of individual literary texts but also of the general system of traditional metaphysics.

THE IMPASSE OF DECONSTRUCTION

The 'deconstructive' reading can by no means free itself from the metaphysical, logocentric reading which it means to contest.⁴²

His texts lead the critic deeper and deeper into a labyrinth until he confronts a final aporia. Aporia: 'that impasse which is the end point of interpretation'.⁴³

one important version of the universal impasse of every deconstructive discourse. In order to free the text from the 'classical' notion of an authoring origin, he [the critic] must use as an instrument of disarticulation the concept he intends to deny.⁴⁴

Deconstructive discourse can never reach a clarity which is not vulnerable to being deconstructed in its turn.⁴⁵

Although no critic has (yet) produced a general theory to account specifically for the many varieties of the universal impasse of deconstructive reading, it is evident that more than three or four versions of hermeneutic aporia exist. Clearly the phenomena of the inescapable endpoint of all deconstructive interpretation result from the irreducible freeplay of figures in language as well as the inevitable operations of difference in texts. Unable to go beyond language, the deconstructor is compelled to use the concepts and figures of the metaphysical tradition. Moreover he cannot con-

struct a trope-free critical discourse himself; neither can he get to an undifferentiated literal bottom in the texts he studies. As Miller sums it up, 'Aporia, impasse, *malconfort*, in which one can neither sit nor stand.'⁴⁶

(My own discourse, for instance, intends to be a literal account of Miller's deconstructive criticism, yet it is a metonymic montage in which themes and citations are playfully and copiously combined more than rigorously developed. While I could presumably alter my abrupt asyndetic format, I could neither escape the chains of figurality nor the network of differences.)

SAND IN THE SALAD

In the realm of contemporary literary theory and criticism, pluralism reigns supreme, say what you will. Our unwritten professional constitution requires that we tolerate and respect one another as civilised gentlepersons. Actually, we seem to have lived with this style of conduct at least since the early days of the periodical essay and the coffeehouse. When the occasional quack theorist threatens to violate the code, we manage to expand our tolerance by adding this outsider to the inside. The limits of pluralism are always ready to expand. It is as though we had a huge salad to which anything could be added without essentially altering the wholesomeness and the flavour.

Now deconstructive criticism, in so far as it is threatening, adds sand to the salad. Such discourtesy is quite unforgivable. Actually, though, not much grit appears to be added. All the deconstructors are conservative in that they work primarily with the established texts of the great tradition and in that they aim mainly to foreground the hitherto unrevealed dark underside of that tradition. Since our literary traditions are not undergoing massive revision, the deconstructors only seem to be discontented sandhogs attempting to sandbag the glorious past.

To the extent that deconstructive criticism undermines the grounds for any 'correct' or 'objective' interpretive reading, however, it threatens to sandblast the salad altogether. At the moment it is an open question whether deconstruction will ultimately become just a granular supplement to a long list of rich ingredients or a new recipe. There seems little chance that we would endure two antithetical traditions and less chance that

deconstructive critics will politely clam up or bury themselves like common East Coast sand fleas.

Notes

1. In *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr (Cleveland, Oh., 1971) p. 216.
2. 'Tradition and Difference', review of *Natural Supernaturalism* by M. H. Abrams, *Diacritics*, vol. 2 (Winter 1972) p. 6.
3. Miller's essay 'Williams' *Spring and All*', appeared in *Daedalus*, vol. 99 (Spring 1970) pp. 4055-34. Derrida's study was published in *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, vol. 62 (July-September 1968) pp. 73-101; it was also published in *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris, 1968); in Derrida's *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972); and in English in Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill., 1973).

For a study of deconstruction and of Derrida's role in the school, see my 'The Book of Deconstructive Criticism', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 12 (Spring 1979), in which I also discuss Paul de Man's work. For a discussion of Miller's early phenomenological criticism, see my 'A Primer of Recent Critical Theories', *College English*, vol. 39 (October 1977); and Sarah Lawall's *Critics of Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

Although published in 1970, Miller's *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* is in the phenomenological mode. Since the preface of this book is dated June 1969, we may assume that the writing of it preceded 1970.

4. 'Nature and the Linguistic Moment', in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley, Calif., 1977) p. 450.
5. 'The Linguistic Moment in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*', in *The New Criticism and After*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Charlottesville, Va., 1976) p. 58. See also Miller's 'Optic and Semiotic in Middlemarch', in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) pp. 143-45.
6. Miller: 'In the beginning was the *diakrisis*'; see his 'The Stone and the Shell: the Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth's *Dream of the Arab*', in *Mouvements premiers: Etudes Critiques offertes à Georges Poulet* (Paris, 1972) p. 143.
7. Miller, 'Walter Pater: a Partial Portrait', *Daedalus*, vol. 105 (Winter 1976) 105 (my italics).
8. 'Tradition and Difference', p. 10 (my italics).
9. Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', *Georgia Review*, vol. 30 (Summer 1976) p. 334 (my italics).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
11. 'The Critic as Host', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 3 (Spring 1977) p. 444.

12. 'Stevens' Rock, II', p. 345.
13. 'Nature and the Linguistic Moment', p. 440.
14. See 'Linguistic Moment', p. 60n.
15. Miller, 'Ariachne's Broken Woof', *Georgia Review*, vol. 31 (Spring 1977) p. 59.
16. 'Tradition and Difference', p. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure', *Georgia Review*, vol. 30 (Spring 1976) p. 22.
19. 'Ariachne's Broken Woof', p. 59.
20. Ibid., p. 56.
21. 'Walter Pater', p. 112.
22. 'Nature and the Linguistic Moment', p. 451.
23. Miller's earliest full-fledged rhetorical deconstructions occur in 'The Fiction of Realism', in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank*, ed. Ada Nisbet (Los Angeles, Calif., 1971) pp. 1-69; and in his introduction to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (1971; rev. edn, Harmondsworth, Middx., 1977) pp. 11-34.
24. 'Stevens' Rock, II', p. 345.
25. Miller, 'Narrative and History', *Journal of English Literary History*, vol. 41 (Fall 1974) p. 467. For an earlier formulation, see Miller's 'The Interpretation of Lord Jim', in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) pp. 211-28.
26. Miller, 'Fiction and Repetition: Tess of the d'Urbervilles', in *Forms of Modern British Fiction*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman (Austin, Tex., 1975) p. 68.
27. Miller, 'Deconstructing the Deconstructers', review of *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (1974) by Joseph N. Riddel, *Diacritics*, vol. 5 (Summer 1975) p. 24. Riddel's book is a deconstructive analysis of Williams's poetry. See his telling response to Miller's review, 'A Miller's Tale', *Diacritics*, vol. 5 (Fall 1975) pp. 56-65.
28. 'Stevens' Rock', p. 31.
29. Ibid., p. 18.
30. Ibid., p. 19. The name of this movement from one displaced figural point to another is *allegory*: 'Story telling, the putting into language of man's experience of his life, is in its writing or reading a hiatus in that experience. [Critical] narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy' (Miller, 'Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 3, Autumn 1976, p. 72.
31. 'Fiction and Repetition', pp. 58-9 (my italics).
32. Miller, 'The Still Heart: Poetic Form in Wordsworth', *New Literary History*, vol. 2 (Winter 1971) p. 298.
33. 'Stevens' Rock, II', p. 341.
34. Generally speaking, Miller takes pains to demonstrate that the texts he reads are already themselves deconstructed. Thus, for example, he says in his essay on William Carlos Williams: 'The project of *Spring*

and *All* is a version of that "deconstruction of metaphysics" that has been a recurrent theme in Western thought' (Williams' *Spring and All*, p. 419). About George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for instance, he states: 'Her fiction deprives itself of its ground in history by demonstrating that ground to be a fiction too, a figure, a myth, a lie' ('Narrative and History', p. 467). Miller frequently points out that 'any literary text, with more or less explicitness or clarity, already reads or misreads itself. The deconstruction which the text performs on itself and which the critic repeats is not of the superstructure of the work but of the ground on which it stands' (Stevens' *Rock, II*, p. 333).

35. 'Still Heart', p. 298.
36. 'Tradition and Difference', p. 8.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 8 (my italics).
38. 'Stevens' *Rock, II*, p. 341.
39. For example, one element used by Miller for deconstruction is the etymological history of key words in texts: 'In any case, the effect of etymological retracing is not to ground the word solidly but to render it unstable, equivocal, wavering, abysmal' ('*Ariadne's Thread*', p. 70).
40. 'Stevens' *Rock, II*, p. 331. Miller says about deconstructive interpretation: 'The boundaries between literature and criticism are broken down in this activity, not because the critic arrogates to himself some vague right to be "poetical" in his writing, but because he recognizes it as his doom not to be able to be anything else' ('Stevens' *Rock, II*, p. 333). Thus, deconstructive interpretation blurs the traditional hierarchical distinction between literature and literary criticism.
41. 'Ariadne's Broken Woof', pp. 59-60.
42. 'Critic as Host', p. 445.
43. 'Walter Pater', p. 112.
44. Miller, 'Beginning with a Text', review of *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) by Edward W. Said, *Diacritics*, vol. 6 (Fall 1976) p. 4.
45. 'Deconstructing the Deconstructers', p. 30.
46. *Ibid.*

13

Hartman and Derrida

JONATHAN CULLER

The echoes of quarrels about deconstruction in literary criticism have now reached the pages of popular news weeklies, and many bemused readers must wonder what all the fuss is about. When *Newsweek* features arch-deconstructor Jacques Derrida in a film star's pose, with open-necked shirt and French raincoat, and when Geoffrey Hartman, our leading interpreter of Wordsworth, devotes a book, *Saving the Text*,¹ to Derrida's book *Glas*, this cultural phenomenon requires explanation.

What is deconstruction? Why should we pay attention to Derrida? Most of his writings are detailed and difficult interpretations of the writings of major philosophers – Plato, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger – and they do not provide overviews or syntheses, distillations of their most important teaching, but close readings of passages that have generally been thought unimportant. These analyses do not initially promise rewards to the non-specialist. They undertake the deconstruction of metaphysics by showing how a philosophical position is subverted or undone, exposed as a construct, by the workings of the discourse that affirms it. Western thinking is based on what Derrida calls 'logocentrism', the assumption that there is an order of meaning, truth, logic, *logos*, which serves as foundation. This assumption emerges in hierarchical distinctions such as meaning/form, essence/accident, serious/non-serious, literal/figurative, transcendental/empirical, positive/negative, where the first term is conceived as prior or fundamental, and the second seen as a complication, derivation or manifestation of the first. When thinking about language, for example, we take serious, literal statements as the norm, instances of the basic nature of language, and conceive of metaphorical assertions and non-serious utterances as special cases, complications to be explained as deviations from the standard cases. Analysis or description has been, Derrida writes,

the enterprise of returning 'strategically,' in idealization, to an origin of a 'priority' seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to conceive of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitation before the imitated, etc. This is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure.

This procedure is so deeply ingrained that it is hard to imagine another. When describing deconstruction, for example, one wants to isolate the simple, normal, standard case that illustrates its 'essential' nature, and then discuss other cases that can be defined as complications, derivations or distortions of 'true' deconstruction. One thing Derrida's arguments show is that potent metaphysical assumptions structure our most elementary thinking. We cannot imagine or bring about an *end* of metaphysics; nor can we happily continue to rely with the same confidence on hierarchical oppositions which are shown to be questionable. Deconstruction does not seek the end of metaphysics but attempts to produce dislocations of these hierarchical structures by exploring how they are subverted by the very texts and arguments that rely on them.

In 'White Mythology', for example, Derrida undertakes a reading of various discussions of metaphor, demonstrating that their treatment of the literal as basic and the metaphorical as derived is an unwarranted imposition. He shows, for example, that given the descriptions of the literal and the metaphorical in the arguments of these texts, the literal can be seen as a special case of the metaphorical rather than vice versa; a metaphor whose metaphoricity has been forgotten. Not only do characterisations of metaphor – seeing one thing in terms of another – turn out to apply to the most basic processes of conceptualisation and naming, but the very terms in which the literal is described – *clarity, directness, transparency* – are scarcely free of metaphorical qualities. When theorists attempt to produce a well-grounded, authoritative distinction between the literal and the figurative, the terms of their discussion also provide grounds for reversing the hierarchy. This reversal – and Derrida emphasises that 'to deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a

particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy' – does not destroy the distinction between literal and metaphorical, which remains essential in any attempt at interpretation, but dislodges it, making it variable and problematic. Similar things happen in the deconstruction of other oppositions, such as speech and writing, inside and outside, presence and absence, and what is represented and the representation.

This undoing of philosophical opposition seems to have little direct relevance to literary criticism, so why have critics and theorists made deconstruction a *cause célèbre*? What are its implications for literary criticism?

First, through the philosophical oppositions it engages, deconstruction has an impact on a large number of critical concepts, including the oppositions between philosophy and literature, the literal and the metaphorical, the intrinsic and the extrinsic or what is inside and what is outside a work, between a representation and what it represents, an original and an imitation, form and meaning, and signifier and signified. By disrupting the hierarchical relationships in which these oppositions have functioned, deconstruction prevents them from being taken for granted and used as if they were simply tools, fixed categories on which one could rely when reading and interpreting and whose authority does not depend on the interpretive acts in which they are used. By reversing and dislodging philosophical hierarchies, deconstruction makes interpretation a process of questioning, exercising and investigating the categories on which reading depends, exploring how they are affected by the machinations of the work one is reading. This is why much criticism seems so theoretical these days: critics are more wary of taking theoretical categories for granted and more interested in seeing how they are complicated and elucidated by the works they are studying. In my view, this has been the most important effect of deconstruction on criticism.

Second, like any major theoretical enterprise, deconstruction makes itself felt by identifying a number of topics which it takes to be central and on which critics can focus in their interpretations of literary works. Existentialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism – all function in a similar way by asserting the fundamental importance of certain questions and leading critics to enquire what literary works, our richest accounts of human experience, have to say about them. The themes of deconstruction – the relations between writing and voice, problems of origin, presence and

absence, marginality, indeterminacy – are less immediately alluring than those of other theoretical enterprises, but they have interested numerous critics because these topics are also structural problems in literary works.

Like Marxist, feminist or psychoanalytic critics, deconstructionists are often charged with forcing every work into the same predetermined mould, making them all address the same questions, and neglecting their ostensible and varied concerns. The assumption seems to be that while deconstruction is relevant to certain philosophically and linguistically self-conscious works, feminism is relevant to novels about women, psychoanalysis to psychological studies and Marxism to books focused on the effects of class difference and economic forces on personal experience. But while it is true that these theories may illuminate explicit themes, the most powerful and revealing applications come at a different level of specificity where one is not concerned with overt themes. Marxism is not a tool for interpreting novels with an explicit social theme but an attempt to understand the complex relations between literary works and the ideological worlds they inhabit. Psychoanalytic criticism at its best does not look for characters with Oedipus complexes and track down psychological themes but investigates the workings of texts in the psychic economies of readers and writers. Feminist criticism does not restrict itself to 'the image of woman' or woman as a theme but investigates, for example, the female reader's relation to sexual codes and the general function of sexual difference in literature. Each theory claims to be able to study with profit works other than those with certain themes, and what might seem an insistence on posing inappropriate questions may well be a shift to another level where a theory that makes claims about the fundamental structures of language and experience attempts to provide insights into the meaning and organisation of texts, whatever their ostensible subject. When deconstructive criticism focuses on questions of writing and voice, it does not deny that at another level the work speaks of love but tries to elucidate the most general sources of authority on which the work relies and the sorts of articulation on which it claims to base meaning.

Third, deconstruction has bearing on literary criticism because of its style of reading – or perhaps one should say *styles*, since there are many things one can learn from Derrida's readings of Saussure, Plato, Rousseau, Freud and Kant. By showing how works subvert

the assumptions and hierarchies on which they depend, he encourages what Barbara Johnson calls 'a careful teasing out of the warring forces of signification within a text'. Though Derrida's matter is primarily philosophical, his writing has been of more interest to critics than philosophers. Philosophers have generally been more concerned with arguments than with texts; they have studied writing for the thoughts it conveys and have had less interest than critics in features of writing that resist or subvert understanding. The New Criticism trained students of literature to savour ironic complexities but made it an article of faith that literary works achieve the harmonious resolution of contradictions. 'The essential unity of a poem', writes Cleanth Brooks in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 'lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude.' Patterns of sound, syntax and figurative language were deemed relevant when they could be made to fit into this hierarchical unity.

Deconstruction is suspicious of these claims to unity, which may require a repression of the heterogeneity of language and the texture of texts. It explores peculiar, uncanny relations within texts and between texts, often involving pun-like echoes that connect signifiers without giving rise to meaning that fits a unified interpretation. It explores how hierarchies are undone, finding that power and pertinence of a work are related to the rigour with which it deconstructs the philosophy in which it is implicated.

Geoffrey Hartman touches upon all these aspects of deconstruction in *Saving the Text*, but he does not aim to provide an exposition of deconstruction or of its implications for literary criticism. He begins with the observation that philosophy 'has rarely been content with the dependence of mind on text. It has wished to liberate thought from a grammar imposed by language or by those special and influential closetings of language which every "great book" fosters.' The question which Derrida's work poses for him is 'How can mind accept rather than subvert or overlook (by sophisticated scanning techniques, which are the opposites of close reading) the language of great writers, both in philosophy and literature?' To achieve this would be to 'save the text'. He is interested in Derrida's reading and writing for its foregrounding of language, and his own writing takes the form of speculation on moments of Derrida's language. 'My book has Derrida as its focus', he writes, 'but it is not an exposition of his work. I am concerned chiefly with Derrida's place in the history of commentary and with *Glas* as an

event in that history.' He does not offer a historical scheme in which to place Derrida, but does in his first three chapters offer descriptions of *Glas* and explorations of its suggestions.

Glas is a bizarre construction that creates relations and possibilities of meaning by conducting discussions in two columns simultaneously. In the left-hand column of each page Derrida pursues an analysis of the concept of the family in Hegel (including related questions of paternal authority, Absolute Knowledge, the Holy Family and the Immaculate Conception). In the right-hand column, facing the author of *The Philosophy of Right*, is the thief and homosexual, Jean Genet. Citations and discussions of his works are woven together with remarks on the literary significance of proper names and signatures, the structure of double binds, the deconstruction of classical sign theory and punning explorations of words linked by phonological resemblance and etymological chains. Constantly at work in the text is the problematical relation between the two columns: between literature and philosophy, maternal and paternal authority, orthodox religions and the religion of flowers, right and property and their subversion.

Speculating on topics raised by these juxtapositions, Hartman discusses the way deconstruction modifies crucial critical concepts, particularly that of commentary and the relation between commenting and commented text. His remarks on theoretical categories are elegant and suggestive, and readers who might prefer sustained analysis can still appreciate his critical one-liners: 'Derrida's very understanding of writing rejects such source-hunting in favour of a more comprehensive kind of haunting.' But above all, Hartman *wonders*: 'One wonders, in reading Lacan, whether philosophical discussions concerning the *stigma*, or "here and now", are so removed, after all, from psychoanalytic speculations on the divine or hysterical stigmata, and the whole issue of ecstasy, identification, incorporation, conversion.' Making connections one will not have thought of, Hartman's writing repeatedly offers suggestions that some readers, well-versed in the problems he is discussing, may be able to develop in interesting ways. This is the reader whom *Saving the Text* addresses.

Hartman has a very ambiguous relation to deconstruction. Denis Donaghue calls him 'one of the most vigorous opponents of deconstruction', perhaps on the grounds that a friend like this is an effective enemy. In fact, Hartman has been hostile to the systematic, analytical aspects of deconstruction. It was *Glas*, he reports,

that helped him approach Derrida, for he could read it as a literary performance. 'Not since *Finnegans Wake* has there been such a deliberate and curious work: less original (but what does "original" mean to Derrida) and mosaic than the *Wake*, even flushed and overreaching, but as intriguingly, wearingly allusive.' 'I have looked at *Glas*', he adds, 'as a work of art and bracketed specific philosophical concepts developed by Derrida, especially in the *Grammatology*.'

Take the philosophy away from deconstruction and what do you get? 'Derridadaism', answers Hartman. One might wonder whether his whole book was not constructed to make Derridadaism out of Derrida, for having celebrated Derridadaism, Hartman then finds deconstruction 'somewhat self-involved', and in his final chapter, 'Words and Wounds', by exploring literary allusions to the wounding and healing powers of language, he attempts to restore 'the analogies to deconstruction's own project in religious writings and especially in literary writings'. Like other moments in the book, this final chapter is immensely suggestive, as Hartman brings up from the trove of poetic words fragments which lend the pathos of beauty to the predicament of signification in general. What he retains of deconstruction here are a number of important themes and, surprisingly, an underlying pessimism, for he can never quite bring himself to conclude that language and texts do heal or save.

Note

1. Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature, Derrida, Philosophy* (Baltimore, Md., 1981)

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